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"HOW'S SMUGGLING NOWADAYS, OLD BOY?" COOLLY ASKED WHITE-HORSE WHEELER, A PECULIAR SMILE COMING INTO HIS FACE.

White-Horse Wheeler.

THE REVENUE-DETECTIVE

OR,

Bouncing the Smuggler Boss.

A Romance of the Northwest Border.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "SILKY STEELE," "NOR'-WEST NICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RIDING FOR DEAR LIFE.

A BLADE of dry grass bent double, a little puff of dust appeared just beyond, and glancing upward, the bullet whistled shrilly as it formed its parabola, the vicious sound almost dying away before the report of the rifle came to the ears of the two fugitives.

For more than an hour, now, they had been riding for dear life, getting the best possible service out of their mounts, yet nursing both speed and strength as only those can who have been reared among horses. For more than an hour they had been striving their level best to shake off those bloodthirsty demons, but this was the beginning of the end!

"They're gaining on us, father!"

"I know it," came the response, in hard, stern tones; but the elder fugitive never cast so much as a glance backward, giving all his care to his laboring steed, aiding it through and over the prairie grass with knees and reins. "The way that bit of lead squealed is proof enough. Now—"

Slipping a foot from stirrup, Maurice Filley turned his ankle so as to rake the weakening horse sharply with his spur, but the only result was a slight up-flinging of the poor creature's head, and Anderson Filley spoke a trifle more sharply:

"No use, I tell you, boy! His hide held just so much, and I've taken it mighty nearly all! But you—The colt is good for as much more."

Maurice Filley cast another glance backward, then brought his horse a bit closer to his father's side, speaking quickly, almost sharply:

"We'll change, father. I'm so much lighter than you, that Morgan'll think he's running free, then. Ready, and I'll—"

"Don't be a fool, boy!" hoarsely interrupted Filley, his voice thickened by something deeper than anger, as he forced his mount a bit further away. "I tell you Morgan's played, and swapping would only kill two, in place of one."

"If either has to go under, I'm that one, father!"

Anderson Filley, for the first time in several miles, turned his head to gaze at their merciless pursuers, and strongly as he had nerved himself, his face grew a shade paler as he saw how greatly that intervening distance had been lessened.

Far away stretched the nearly level prairie, marked here and there by a lone tree or a little clump of bushes above which rose a few taller heads; but if his eyes took note of these, it was only because he wondered if they would not have shown greater wisdom by electing one of these timber islands as a cover for their death-fight against yonder howling, screeching, sanguinary pack of red-skinned demons.

The long and hard chase had strung the pack out, as a matter of course, but a dozen of the Sioux were riding in a fairly compact clump, only scattering sufficiently to prevent their coveted prey from veering to either side, for refuge or for more favorable ground.

Each one of the Indians seemed straining every nerve of man and beast to gain the lead and be the first to strike the fugitives, but their ponies were so evenly matched that the leading dozen came on all in a clump, he who led in one moment, losing that advantage as he flung up rifle to send a bullet whistling through that quarter of a mile of space.

"I couldn't do any worse than that!" cried Maurice, with a half-laugh, as a puff of dust shot up to their right. "Shall I try 'em a whirl, father?"

His boyish face was a bit paler than usual, but the battle-light was in his brave blue eyes as he asked the question, and his fingers gripped the repeating-rifle which balanced across his thighs.

Anderson Filley did not reply immediately. From gazing backward, he cast a troubled look ahead toward the far-away hills. If they might only reach them!

"If I can't hit, maybe I can scare," persisted the youngster, bringing the barrel of the rifle into the hollow of his left arm. "If they know we've got teeth, maybe they'll shy off, don't you reckon?"

"I wish I could think it, Maurice, but they're after scalps, and I fear they'll—Save your cartridges, son, for we haven't any too many of them—worse luck!"

Maurice made no reply. This was a fact which had been troubling him ever since those

bloodthirsty demons first came into view, more than an hour before. Not a cartridge showed in their looped belts, and they had barely sufficient ammunition to fill the magazines of their Winchester.

Living as they did, far away from a news center, neither father nor son had heard of the terrible tidings from the Rosebud, nor did they know how Sitting Bull, with his Sioux murderers, was pressing hard for the Canada line, beyond which he knew lay their only chance for life.

Important matters, of which more anon, had taken Anderson Filley and his seventeen year old son from home that morning early. One of the items on their memoranda was a supply of fixed ammunition, but neither father nor son dreamed how sorely they would feel this lack before the ending of that very day.

On swept the fugitives, and on tore their pursuers. Minute after minute passed, and with each one a little of that precious vantage-ground was lost. Frequently Anderson Filley cast his eyes backward, and each look told him the end could not be delayed much longer.

"The colt can run a bit faster, son?" he asked, after one of those backward glances.

"If Morgan only could—Yes, father," hesitated the lad, a flush leaping into his face, only to fade away and leave it paler than before.

"You surely don't mean—"

"Just that!" sternly cried the father, gathering his nerve for the emergency. "You must go, Maurice, for—"

"Not without you, father! It's both or neither, sir! Why, how could I face mother, or Linda, if I ran away without— I just can't!"

"You can, and must, my son. Maybe I can stand 'em off—"

"Then two of us surely can, father! Don't make me leave you, for I just can't do it, sir!" brokenly cried the boy, hot tears dimming his eyes at the bare thought.

If hard for him to hear, it was even harder for the other to say, but he had counted up all chances, and knew he was acting for the best.

"If we tried that, and failed, what would become of mother and Linda, Maurice?" he asked, moving a bit nearer and gently clasping an arm of his boy with a hand that trembled from emotion, not from fear. "Unless they have warning in time to flee or to hide, what would be their fate? Think of them in the power of such devils! Think—You must ride on to warn and save them, Maurice!"

"And leave—Don't drive me away, father!"

The hot tears were falling now, and Anderson Filley shivered as one drop struck his hand. It was hard, and growing harder with each passing moment, to drive his beloved son away from his side with stern words: for stern they must be, to conquer his reluctance, just then.

"You see that patch of brush ahead, Maurice?" he asked, then adding, swiftly: "When we draw near to that you must take the left hand, then ride the colt for all he's worth. No words: I say you must do it! If you fail them, mother and Linda are lost; but if you try your level best, they may both be saved."

"But—you, father?"

"I'm a man, they're women. Your mother and sister, Maurice. Would you let them fall alive into such hands? Kill the colt, but what you get there far enough ahead to save them, boy!"

"I can't; change horses, father, and let me fight them!"

"There isn't time; and if there was, it wouldn't do," grimly spoke the father, as two bullets zip-zipped close by them. "My weight'd break him down, after the race he's had. No: you alone can save them, son, and—Be ready! You know the lay of the ground, and know how to make the best of it. Get there first! Take mother and Linda to the cave we found that day, and wait there for me."

Maurice attempted to speak, but his emotions were very strong, and Anderson Filley leaned far enough over to brush his lips with a hand.

"Go! and God's blessings attend you, my dear boy! I'll pull through, if any one man can, but don't tell them too bluntly how you left me. Say I sent you back to care for them. Say I'll fetch help, if possible. If I fail—we'll meet up yonder, I trust!"

There was no time for further speech, for the dividing point was close at hand. Maurice caught a hand, to kiss it passionately. He gazed into those gray-blue eyes, like one hoping for a reprieve; but they only emphasized the words already spoken, and then—father and son were parted by the little clump of stunted trees and bushes.

Wilder, fiercer than ever yelped the bloodthirsty Sioux as they saw this division, and for the first time since that chase began, Anderson Filley uttered a cry of bitter hatred and defiance, swinging partly around in his saddle and bringing his Winchester to a level.

With the report, a pony plunged headlong to the ground, its rider yelling shrilly as he shot through the air with ludicrously frog-like contortions. More lucky still was the rancher's second shot, for it caught an Indian squarely be-

tween the eyes, even as he swung himself to the right and sunk lower to find cover behind the body of his pony.

Again rung forth that shout of fierce defiance, blending with the mad howls which burst from the lips of the savages as they beheld the death of one brother, the disablement of another.

"Come on, ye devils! Here's a man's scalp, if ye know how to win it! Come on!" hoarsely shouted the rancher, adding in lower and far different tones: "Send them, good Lord! Send them all!—after me, not after my poor boy!"

But even as the prayer left his lips, Anderson Filley saw that his desperate ruse had proven only partly successful. Although the majority of the Indians came yelping along his track, some of their number swerved to the left hand, and were instantly lost to sight of the elder fugitive.

A strange sound escaped the rancher's lips as he saw this: a curse and a prayer, blended together with a groan; and he fired one more shot in the forlorn hope of thus drawing the entire party after him, leaving his son to win clear and save their loved ones. But the lead was wasted, and holding his few remaining shots in reserve, Anderson Filley gave all his attention to helping his failing steed along, hoping against hope that he might even yet gain the broken ground far ahead, where he might hope to stand the redskins off, at least long enough to exact a fair price for his own life.

Blood will tell, and Morgan was running on his courage, now, as he had been for the last half-dozen miles or more. Even then, with such terrible fears weighing heavily upon his soul, the rancher felt a pang of remorseful pity as he raked those steaming flanks with his spurs, bent on extracting the last ounce of strength, the last burst of speed.

"It's death either way, I reckon, old boy," he muttered, hardly conscious of the sounds as he cast keen glances ahead, like one searching for some dimly-remembered spot. "Eight to one, and still others coming hot-foot to join in the circus! Long odds, but—I wish 'twas still longer, though!"

That covered the keenest sting. The rancher was not afraid of death on his own account. But, his boy! And, beyond Maurice, his wife, his fair young daughter!

"Guard and shield them, oh, Lord!" he prayed in his heart of hearts. "Never mind me, but—spare them, for Christ's sake!"

Still onward the chase led, heading for the broken ground now so distinctly visible. Once gained, even a single man might make a strong fight against heavy odds there: but it was fated not to be!

Riding like veritable demons came the Sioux, doubly infuriated by the loss of a brother, and such a protracted race. Shooting as they came, one of their bullets found its billet, and with an almost human groan of pain, the poor horse reeled dizzily, then plunged forward with renewed speed. The end had come, but, true to his ancestry, Morgan would run until he dropped dead beneath his rider!

CHAPTER II.

A GALLANT CHARGE.

"WHITE in the lead, but reds crowding him mighty close! Now, just what does it all mean? Sport, or tragedy? Panfaron, or pure business? That's the question before the house to-day."

So muttered one who leaned against a rock, the top of which supported his elbows, his hands steadying a pair of field-glasses, through which he was keenly studying sundry little specks on the prairie, far away, and something below his present level.

A mist-like patch of rising dust had first attracted his notice, and as Walter Wheeler was in that northern section for the express purpose of keeping his eyes open and his other senses on the keen alert, that was sufficient excuse for bringing his glasses into play.

"Red and white! Native, or imports from the lower country? Does that poor devil deserve all he's feeling just now, or is it—He's got it now!"

So powerful was the glass he held to his eyes, that Wheeler could note how spasmodically the horse of the fugitive plunged on receipt of that bullet. In his natural interest he lifted his head, and for an instant it gave him a curious little thrill as both pursued and pursuers dropped out of his field of vision.

"A good three miles, if a yard!" were his next words, as he caught sight of the chase once more, estimating the distance with his unaided eyes. "You'll never make it, poor fellow! You'll never make it, unless I chip in. Well—why not?"

The good glasses were once more brought into requisition, this time sweeping the comparatively level tract of ground lying between himself and the chase, lingering longest on a shallow depression which ran diagonally from the foot-hills, out and across the grassy plain.

Wheeler had noted this before, and his present inspection was but the work of a few moments, then he closed his glass and replaced it in its case, rapidly moving away from his post of observation, muttering as he did so:

"Grit your teeth and stick to it a bit longer, friend! I'll have a finger in the pie, even if you're past enjoying the dessert!"

A dozen seconds sufficed to take him to the side of a noble white stallion which was standing untethered, just where its master had left it, many minutes before; and simply signing the intelligent creature to follow him, White-horse Wheeler led the way at a rapid pace through the thick-lying rocks, heading in such a manner as to strike the dry water-course without exposing himself to the gaze of the yelling red-skins on the level beyond.

Fortunately, the lay of the ground was all in his favor, and in but little more than one minute, Wheeler was in the saddle, riding diagonally away from the rocks, his head on a level with the grassy plain, his eyes once more peering through the lenses.

Rapid as had been his movements, they consumed time enough to make a material change in the condition of affairs, as he now saw.

The wounded horse was rapidly failing, and the ravening red-skins seemed fairly on the heels of the fugitive, lined as they now were.

"You can't make it, poor fellow, so why don't you—Ha!"

White-horse Wheeler gave a sharp ejaculation, reining in his steed hastily, then steadying himself for a closer look at the fugitive, whose face was now more distinctly visible as a puff of wind blew back the broad brim of his soft felt hat.

"Filley, by the Eternal!"

Closing the glasses and hanging them to his saddle, White-horse Wheeler rode more rapidly along the dry water-course, his bronzed face a bit paler than usual, his firm lips compressed, his dark eyes seeming to fill with fire as he watched that unequal chase.

He had recognized the white man, now, and he had all the more reason for interfering to save his life, if that were possible.

Too deeply interested to even soliloquize, Wheeler rode swiftly along the creek-bed, seeking a point where he might welcome his friend on his coming, and fitly receive those bloodthirsty fiends beyond.

He quickly gained the desired position, then faced the chase, which was now barely a mile distant.

Poor Morgan was still plunging onward, though in his last desperate struggle to save his master, and as the horse stumbled slightly, Wheeler could see the stirrups swinging empty.

"Ready for a leap when the fall comes! Just a bit longer, old man! Oh, if I only had my Winchester! If I only had!"

White-horse Wheeler gave an unconscious sigh to accompany that muttered regret, at the same time mechanically assuring himself by touch that his revolvers were in smooth working condition. But he had time for nothing more.

With an amazing burst of speed, Morgan carried his rider ahead for a few rods, but it was an expiring effort, and death cut it short.

"On guard, Filley!" ejaculated the man in the gully, as he saw the end coming; but the rancher was fully upon the alert, and as Morgan plunged headlong to earth, Anderson Filley shot over his head, with legs bent to receive his weight.

Alighting clear of the dying animal, the rancher instantly turned to receive what he must have felt would be a death-rush, his rifle springing to his shoulder. But, instead of rushing directly on, the cunning Sioux divided, circling around their victim, hiding behind the bodies of their agile ponies, yelling and screeching in devilish joy at their almost assured triumph as they sped around to cut off all possible escape by flight to the hills.

As he saw the good horse fall, White-horse Wheeler started his own mount up the bank of the dry creek, and only their preoccupation with the dismounted rancher prevented the Sioux from sighting this new adversary on the instant.

"Steady, Whirlygust!" and a pressure of his knees held the white stallion stationary on that steep incline for the moment.

Instantly divining their purpose, Wheeler at the same time saw how surely they were playing into his own hand in their wish to scatter the last possible hope of their victim.

"If they don't riddle him! Down behind your horse, man!"

Strong as were his nerves, schooled by ten years of adventurous life, White-horse Wheeler could hardly smother that warning shout, and those few seconds of waiting were about the most difficult of all his span. But, an instant later, he saw Anderson Filley sink out of sight in the grass, and a low laugh rose to his lips as he divined the cause: the rancher had made a breastwork of his dead steed, and was preparing to sell his life as dearly as possible.

The two little squads of Indians dashed around and came together, face to their victim, backs to the broken ground, never once suspecting what a startling reception was even then being prepared for them.

"Up and at 'em, Whirlygust!" muttered White-horse Wheeler, the reins hanging free, his hands each filled with a heavy revolver.

With a cat-like plunge and scramble the stallion cleared the bank and then sped, low and level, direct for the exultant savages ahead, his smooth movements making it almost as sure shooting from the saddle as from the earth itself.

Never a sound uttered the daring horseman as he sped nearer, his pistols ready for hot work. Never a suspicion had the Sioux until this new foe was almost upon their backs.

"Split 'em wide open, boy!" cried White-horse Wheeler, as he saw that he was discovered at last. "Hunt your holes, ye copper devils! It's pale death on a white horse, and—Lie down, ye bloodhound!"

Swift as an arrow fresh loosed from the string Whirlygust dashed directly into the squad, the Sioux scattering in dismay with yells and howls of angry consternation, no doubt fancying themselves drawn into a cunning ambushade.

Several of them fired their rifles, but it was hastily and without any attempt at taking aim. Then White-horse Wheeler was fairly among them, shooting right and left as he tore along, giving a reckless laugh of grim triumph as two of the burly braves flung up their arms and reeled backward with bullet-holes showing in their broad bosoms.

Like a living wedge the daring rider split the squad, turning back in his saddle to send a couple more shots at the demoralized red-skins before shouting aloud to the rancher:

"All eyes open, Filley! Catch a pony, if you can, and make for home! Save the ladies, and leave these devils to me!"

There was no time for more, just then. Thoroughly surprised though they had been, the Sioux were trained warriors, and, seeing but the single foe, they rallied and came with a rush, sending bullets ahead of them, more than one of which whistled uncomfortably near the mark.

Nothing could have pleased White-horse Wheeler better just then, for he saw that the savages had forgotten the rancher for the instant in their hatred for the man who had slain two of their best braves.

"Come and see me, pretty lads!" he cried, mockingly, deftly changing legs, so that he sat in his saddle with face to the rear, shooting rapidly, yet with hardly any attempt at securing an aim. "The latch-string is out, if you know how to grab it. Come and see me—do!"

He was sending his bullets wide of the mark, yet he was not idly wasting lead, either. It was his wish to draw the entire party after himself, thus giving Anderson Filley a chance to escape, either afoot or by catching up, one of the two riderless ponies, both of which remained by their dead masters.

Armed with magazine rifles and plenty of ammunition, the Sioux kept up a rattling fire while chasing that mocking rider, and as they saw how many shots he wasted, they rapidly rallied from their first feeling of superstitious awe, and now their sole thought was how to close with him the sooner.

"Eyes to the front, ye copper imps!" muttered Wheeler, as he saw the rancher running toward one of the Indian ponies. "Let him get a fair start, and—meant it, didn't ye?"

His tone abruptly changed as a bullet stung him between arm and side, and for the instant fancying himself really hurt, his right hand sent a bullet straight through the chest of the Sioux brave who had grazed him.

Instead of cowering the rest, this third death sent their anger up to boiling pitch, and they fiercely urged their panting ponies along, yelling and screeching like veritable imps from Tophet.

Other yells answered them back, and with a startled ejaculation, White-horse Wheeler shifted back to his natural position, lifting himself in the stirrups for a keen look ahead.

He caught sight of half a dozen horsemen speeding toward him, and it did not call for a second glance to label them: Sioux, and almost certainly, a portion of this band, who had been distanced in the chase.

"Wake up, Whirlygust, old boy!" muttered his master, sending a pressure along his knees. "This begins to look like solid business, don't it, now?"

Veering sharply to the left, Wheeler bent low in the saddle to lessen the target as much as possible, now that he was offering a quartering shot; but so swiftly did the white horse run, that nearly every bullet passed behind its floating tail, and cries of covetous amazement mingled with the vindictive yells of the savage pursuers.

"Would like a horse, wouldn't ye?" grimly laughed the rough-rider, as he stole a backward glance, to break off with an oath of rage.

As he rose erect in his saddle, he could see a number of Indians racing straight ahead, evidently after Anderson Filley, although a rise in the ground cut off his view in that direction.

Fidelity to a friend was one of his strong points, and Wheeler signed Whirlygust to slacken his pace, meaning to turn and dash back to share the fate of the rancher, let that be what it might, but a second, and a fairer look convinced him that such an effort could only

only add another victim to the list, without effecting any good to balance it.

He could see fully a score of Sioux braves, part of them veering to cut off his escape, others racing directly toward the hills for which the rancher had been heading when overtaken.

"To turn that way would fetch the whole raft upon him, and then—what would become of his wife, and of Linda! God protect the little lady from those devils!"

His decision taken, White-horse Wheeler no longer hesitated, but giving Whirlygust the signal to run low and level, he opened fire at his nearest pursuers, resolved to sell his life at the dearest possible price, if fate should be against his giving them the slip altogether.

CHAPTER III.

COLONEL DARKE CRUGER.

THIS gallant charge took Anderson Filley fully as much by surprise as did the Sioux braves, though after a somewhat more agreeable fashion.

Knowing by instinct what the ending of that tremendous burst of speed must be, the sudden collapse of poor old Morgan failed to catch him unprepared, and almost instantly rallying from the shock of that flying leap, he turned to sell his life as dearly as might be.

He knew what that division and swift circling meant, but was powerless to hinder it, and sinking down behind the body of his horse, he cocked his rifle, meaning to protract his defense as long as possible, since by so doing he would be adding to the chances in favor of his brave son's winning clear.

Lying low behind his still quivering barricade, Filley saw nothing of White-horse Wheeler's coming, until the Indians scattered like a covey of frightened birds before his onset. Even then, when he caught the words flung him by the rough-rider, the rancher could hardly trust his own senses, and he wasted a cartridge through looking for the bold hearts who surely must be following that reckless leader.

The reaction from grim despair to glad hopefulness dimmed his eyes and unsteadied his hands, else the Sioux braves would hardly have forgotten their intended victim so entirely during those first few moments, and not many of them would have lived to begin another death-chase so soon.

As it was, he wasted a second shot before he took in the full meaning of the words flung at him by White-horse Wheeler, but then he lost little time in acting upon that hasty advice.

Two of the Sioux warriors had fallen to the first shots fired by the gallant stranger, and their ponies, true to their training, stayed by their dead masters; and as his half-bewildered gaze rested upon these, Anderson Filley started forward, his thoughts once more centered on his loved ones.

One of the ponies shied away at his hasty approach, laying back its ears and making a vicious show of gleaming teeth, but the other one had less liberty, and the rancher gave a short ejaculation of grateful joy as he saw how the creature was held: the dead warrior not only gripped the long halter in one stiffening hand, but his body lay fairly across the braided rope.

"Steady, boy!" soothingly spoke Filley, as the wild creature backed away at his coming. "Help me out of this scrape, and you shall live in clover all the rest of your days!"

He bent over, then sprung forward, adding his weight to that of the dead Indian, with difficulty choking back a shout of exultation as he firmly gripped the halter, checking that backward start.

He saw that the Sioux had been liberally supplied with fixed ammunition for his Winchester, and as both weapons were of the same caliber, he quickly transferred the cartridge-belt to his own person, then slung the Winchester across his back by the shoulder-belt attached, in order to have the full use of both hands in completing the capture of the Indian pony.

That was to be no easy task, as quickly became manifest. Snorting, striking out viciously with its fore feet, then wheeling about to lash out with its heels, the wild creature did all it knew to break away from this would-be master; but Anderson Filley realized how much might depend on mastery now, and unhesitatingly took the longest chances.

Shortening the rope, foot by foot, holding all he won, the rancher drew near enough to deftly slip a half-hitch around the muzzle of the pony; and after that each fierce struggle but brought its subjection nearer. With its wind cut off, the horse grew confused, and slipping in closer to its side, Filley leaped fairly upon its back.

The pony squatted like a frightened cat, shivering in every muscle as it felt that alien weight, and the rancher cast a hasty glance about him to take note of matters before urging his mount to full flight.

A startled cry broke from his lips, for he caught sight of other red-skins hurrying that way, almost surely on his track.

"Part of those we ran away from!" he muttered, jerking the head of his pony around toward the broken ground, then dashing spurs fiercely into its flanks. "It looks cowardly,

but—you're a man, Edgar Winston, and they're women!"

He cast a brief look toward the quarter in which the rough-rider had vanished, and where the last of the Sioux braves were sinking out of sight behind the gentle swell in the prairie, then lashed his still refractory prize to greater speed.

Screeching, yelping, howling as only thoroughly maddened savages can who have a victim in view, the Sioux braves lashed their foaming ponies in hot pursuit, all the more eager to overtake him now that they had long since despaired of coming up in time to share in his death.

With a desperate plunge downward, and another mad scramble upward, Anderson Filley crossed the dry creek-bed, shaping his flight so as to cross the line taken by Maurice at his commands.

"I'll keep 'em from following the boy, if I can't do any better," was his grim determination, as his half-tamed pony once more began to rebel.

A vicious shake of the head caused the half-hitch to drop from its muzzle, and then the struggle became more even. Only, each moment now was worth untold gold to the rancher, and he knew that the loss of a single minute, even, might mean death or worse to his loved ones.

The mustang acted like a veritable imp of vicious perversity, only kept in forward motion by the unceasing use of spur and rope. It bucked, it squatted, to leap sidewise, then back again; it stood on end, and more than once would have flung itself over backward, only for the heavy blows dealt it by the angry rancher with his clinched fist.

Through all this, Anderson Filley took note of his enemies and their rapid gaining upon him, and a savage curse passed his lips as he saw some of their number shooting out to cut off his further flight in the direction he had chosen.

"You devil! On with you, or—"

With a furious bound the mustang tried once more to fling its unwelcome rider, but striking a stone hidden by the tall grass, it fell headlong, flinging the rancher clear over its head, to strike the earth on his shoulders.

A chorus of exultant yells broke from the Indians as they noted this mishap, but Filley was on his feet in an instant, still gripping the braided halter. He jerked savagely at the pony, but only that once; he saw that the creature had fractured a fore-leg, and the gleaming white bone showing through the bloody flesh, told him how surely his second mount was ruined.

The red-skins were rushing forward, seemingly confident of an easy triumph now, but Filley jerked the Winchester from his shoulders, making sure it was still in serviceable condition, then sent back a shout of grim defiance as he breasted the slope, meaning to stand at bay among those thick-lying rocks, since he could do no better.

From wild excitement he shifted to cool determination, now that he could see but the one ending. Further flight was out of the question, for even on that broken ground the Sioux, with their catlike ponies, could quickly overtake and ride him down.

"I'll eat my bigness, I reckon!" he muttered, looking to his rifle, opening and shutting the breech-block, to make sure all was in working condition. "And while they're doing me, they'll not be able to bother my boy—God guard and bless him!"

The rancher was fully nerved to a desperate fight unto the death; but it was not to be. Even as he raised his rifle to single out his first victim, a loud, hearty cheer burst upon the air, and a squad of well-mounted men dashed out of an adjacent gully, pouring a demoralizing fire into the ranks of the Sioux, just then collecting together for a headlong dash upon the bayed rancher.

One or two of the warriors fell from their ponies, while others plainly betrayed their hurts by clinging to mane and halter as their mustangs wheeled in hurried flight.

"Pour it in, lads!" cried a clear, stern voice. "Powder's cheap, but don't throw away your lead! Mark every devil's imp of them, but—steady, boys! It's our picnic, as we hold it, but they're too many for a free dance in the open!"

Anderson Filley gave vent to a joyful cry as he heard that volley and saw that charge, but his face darkened anew as those notes came to his ears, and something akin to fear shot into his visage as the bold speaker turned in his direction, shouting as he rode up the slope.

"Just in time to save your pelt, old friend! You're all right? The imps haven't marked you, for keeps, I'm hoping?" he added, a touch of anxiety in his bold, reckless face as he took note of that sadly dilapidated figure among the rocks.

"Colonel Cruger!"

"Ay, old neighbor, but the nickname fits best just now," laughingly said the other, as he sprang from the saddle with outstretched hand in friendly greeting. "I reckon those red imps

yonder would vote for 'Colonel Cruger,' if they had time to cast a ballot! But you—you're not badly hurt, dear sir?"

"No. Only scratched up a bit, but that don't count! My folks—I fear for their safety! The land seems fairly alive with red demons, and if any of them should—Curse them! where do they spring from?"

"From the Rosebud last, I reckon. Of course you've heard how they ate up the Seventh, under Custer?"

"What! Not—But I can't talk now, while my folk may be in even worse peril than you saved me from just now. I'm grateful—I must have gone under but for your coming, colonel, and—"

"Don't mention it, dear fellow: it cost me nothing."

"I must go to them; but—can't you save him?"

"Who is that?"

Anderson Filley hastily described how a man whom he called Edgar Winston, by which name alone he knew the gallant rider who had charged to his rescue, had succeeded in drawing off the squad of Indians who were pressing him so hard, and begged the colonel to ride to his aid.

Cruger shook his head, at the same time sounding a shrill whistle by way of recall to his men, who were still sending lead in chase of the discomfited red-skins.

"You can see for yourself, Filley, how foolhardy that would be," he said, with a touch of harshness in his tones. "I've only got a scant dozen lads with me, while yonder goes double their number, to say nothing of all that may be prowling beyond our immediate range. No; he'll have to hoe his own row for this once, though I'll wish him good luck in the harvest. As you say, it's ladies first just now."

Colonel Cougar—to give him the title by which he was far better known along the northern border than by his own name—quickly marshaled his men, and at a sign from him, one of their number slipped over the cantle of his saddle, offering the better seat to the anxious rancher.

Filley accepted this, with a muttered word of thanks, and without further delay the little party started onward through the defile out of which the squad had charged so opportunely.

Instead of showing delight at his rescue, Filley seemed actually downcast, frowning darkly as he cast a glance across the prairie before it was lost to sight for the time being. Nor was all his foreboding concerning the man whom he knew as Edgar Winston.

Beyond a reasonable doubt, Colonel Cougar had saved him from death at the hands of the red-skins, but the rancher would almost rather have fought out his own battle to the bitter end than to have incurred such a heavy debt to this particular neighbor.

On the contrary, the colonel seemed almost hilariously gay as they rode rapidly along through the hills, and as he spoke of those to whose aid they were ostensibly hastening, his voice assumed an ardent tone.

But then came a sudden change. The colonel lifted his hand as he abruptly drew rein, and the man in front of whom Anderson Filley was riding flung both arms around his body, holding him helpless to draw a weapon, while the leader thrust forward with a gleaming blade, as though to bury it in the ribs of the betrayed rancher!

"Hands off, curse ye!" cried Filley, struggling desperately to tear his pinioned arms free. "What do you mean by this?"

"First, to pull your teeth, dear fellow!" mocked Colonel Cougar, as his keen-edged blade cut the stout belt in twain, letting the arms fall clattering to the ground.

CHAPTER IV.

AN INQUISITIVE HOST.

"EASY, ye blamed critter!" growled his immediate captor, putting on the pressure. "Want me to crack in the ribs o' ye—s-a-y?"

"Not too rough, Melton, but just rough enough," coolly said Cruger, bending far over in the saddle, to recover the belt of arms, which he hung across his own mount.

Anderson Filley threw his whole strength into the effort, and toppled both himself and his captor out of the saddle, hoping thus to win freedom, heedless of his own bones. But before he could regain his footing, several of the men sprang from their saddles upon him, and under the eye of their leader, quickly bound his arms behind his back.

When this was done, Filley ceased his struggles, pantingly returning the mocking gaze of his enemy with a glow of defiance in his gray-blue eyes.

"Why don't you put your question again, dear man?" asked Cruger, showing a glimpse of white teeth beneath his curling mustaches. "Why don't you ask what sort of deal it is I'm giving you, Filley?"

"Because you'd lie in answer, you cur!" hoarsely grated the rancher.

"Well, I'm not so mighty sure you've shot wide of the mark, old neighbor!"

As he spoke, Colonel Cruger gave a sign, which was promptly obeyed. Lifted by strong

arms, Filley was placed astride a horse, then bound to the saddle by sundry turns of a trail-rope, part of which connected his ankles beneath the animal's belly.

Not another word was spoken while this was being done. In that mute signal Colonel Cruger had given his orders, and his men fully understood their work. Anderson Filley was hampered beyond the possibility of escape, and apparently scorning to ask for leniency, he bore his harsh treatment in grim silence.

When the bonds were applied to his satisfaction, Colonel Cruger touched up his horse, and the party rode along at a rapid gait, plainly heading for the Lone Ranch, as the home of the colonel was called.

Although not the builder of this house, Colonel Cruger had occupied it as the sole owner, for a goodly number of years. He passed for a successful grower of fine stock, and was known to deal extensively in lumbering operations, having several timber camps, and one or two saw-mills, at different locations.

Outside of this, there was really little known about him, as a man. He had but one neighbor, to use the term as generally understood. Anderson Filley owned and occupied a stock ranch some few miles from his location, but there was no other home within a full score miles.

Colonel Cruger was now nearing his fortieth year, judging from his face, though a wild and perilous life might have lent a finger in drawing those lines and frosting the few silver threads which marked his jetty hair and full beard.

He was tall and massively built, without being at all cumbersome in his movements; indeed, there was a peculiar muscular liteness in his every movement which went far to fit his title of "Cougar."

No doubt feeling that he could implicitly trust his henchmen, Colonel Cougar took the lead, heading directly as possible for the Lone Ranch, which he now seemed very desirous of reaching. Yet he did not neglect certain precautions, which appeared perfectly natural after their little brush with Sitting Bull's Sioux braves. Men were sent out on either flank to guard against a possible surprise, and the chief himself kept a keen lookout to the front.

Although he must have been suffering greatly in mind, if only on the score of his dear ones, Anderson Filley bravely schooled his face to a stern composure. Knowing how little he had to hope from these men, now that their leader had fairly thrown aside the mask of friendship, he was far too proud to beg any favors, even for his family.

Still, he was fully as eager to catch sight of the Lone Ranch as was the colonel himself. If nothing more, he would then know what fate to expect for himself.

The ride was a long and a rough one, but, thoroughly acquainted with every rod of the ground, the party made good time, and long before the afternoon sun was ready to veil its face behind the western hills, the dark, forbidding-looking ranch was sighted.

Drawing rein before the building, Colonel Cougar sprang from the saddle, turning his nag over to one of his men, then watching with a grim smile the removal of his captive.

Signs took the place of words until Anderson Filley was lifted from the saddle and guarded into the house, but as his feet crossed the threshold, his forced composure gave way, and he hoarsely spoke:

"Are you all devil, Darke Cruger? Haven't you even a spark of manhood in your composition?"

"Well, you'd ought to be able to answer that question, Filley, if any man can. Surely you've been studying me closely enough of late!"

A hot flush swept in and out of the prisoner's face, but he passed that covert taunt by without further notice, to say:

"I'm not begging for myself, mind you, Colonel Cruger, but—my family? Think what may be coming to them, even now! Think what will be their fate if those hell-bounds—Oh, if you're white as your hide betokens, send and save my poor women from massacre!"

A short, hard laugh broke from those bearded lips, and Colonel Cougar nodded his head. In obedience to that sign, the guards forced the rancher through to another room, which apparently had but the one mode of entrance or of exit.

"That'll do, lads. Reckon I can manage the gentleman, now," said their master, making a sign which speedily sent the guards out of the apartment.

Pointing toward a chair which stood at a little distance from the one into which he himself sunk, Colonel Cougar added:

"Be seated, my dear fellow! Nay," with a quick gesture as the rancher was about to speak in further pleading for his loved ones, "I'll hear nothing more until you are seated, dear man."

With a sound which rose only to his throat, and which might have been curse or groan, Filley obeyed. Reckless as to his own safety, he was suffering torments on account of his wife, his daughter, his son.

"Now, my dear neighbor and priceless friend,

will you please answer me just one question, before I set your fears at rest? Where were you riding when the red-skins jumped you, to-day?"

"To town, for ammunition and other articles of necessity."

"You meant to fetch those necessary articles home with you. I understand that much, but—what precious article was it you meant to leave behind you when ready to return home?"

Drawlingly though he pronounced the words, careless though his whole carriage was, Colonel Cruger could not entirely conceal the anxiety with which he awaited an answer.

But none came. Anderson Filley was once more cold and hard to the outward eye. He seemed far more interested in the bonds which still confined his arms, giving them a restless hitch or two.

"You mean that you will not use your tongue so long as your arms are hampered? Is that it?" asked the colonel, springing from his seat and drawing a long, double-edged dagger from his belt. "All right, and there you are, my fine fellow!"

He cut the rope, then drew back with a low, contemptuous laugh as the rancher stretched his arms and limbered his cramped muscles.

"If you think to kick up a row, Filley, think twice before trying it on. I'm alone in here with you, but I never yet met the man who could take the print of my back in the dust! You can't even begin to break away, so don't try it on. As your best friend, mind!"

"My best friend! You?" bitterly echoed the rancher.

"Certainly I am, dear man, else why have you taken such a powerful interest in my comings and my goings, of late?" mocked Cruger. "And now, once more: why did you take this ride, to-day?"

"I told you before. On business of my own."

"And lied in your throat while uttering the words!"

Filley half-crouched as though to leap at the throat of his enemy, but then he drew his sturdy form erect, coldly retorting:

"Only a cur would use such words to an unarmed man, Darke Cruger. Why don't you put the cap-sheaf on? Strike, since you threaten!" with a glance of bitter scorn at the gleaming dagger which the colonel had instinctively lifted at his ominous movements.

"Do you really reckon I need this bit of steel?" mocked the other, replacing the weapon in his belt. "Why, man, dear, if I felt so inclined, I could break your back without half straining my muscles."

"Talk is cheap, but—"

"Then why don't you be a bit more nimble with your tongue, Filley? Why don't you answer my question, without further delay?"

"Your asking an answer is sufficient reason for my denying one," sternly retorted the rancher, his eyes glowing with poorly-suppressed hatred as he added:

"I'll never forgive you for this action, Darke Cruger! 'Twas a dog's trick, when—"

"And this is—just what?" sharply interposed the colonel, drawing a folded paper from his bosom and flinging it before the startled gaze of his captive.

While springing this surprise, Colonel Cougar made the keenest possible use of his eyes, trying to read a confession in that stern face.

But in this hope he was doomed to disappointment. If Anderson Filley recognized the document, or had good cause for dreading a revelation of its contents, he showed no signs of outward fear or dismay.

"How should I know?" he quietly asked, arching his brows in real or admirably counterfeited indifference. "Nothing that concerns me, or that can even begin to excuse this outrageous treatment, I'm sure."

"Then you deny that your hand wrote these lines?"

"Let me see them, and I'll answer you as you deserve."

Colonel Cougar laughed harshly as Filley reached out a hand to take the paper. He drew it back, as though far too precious to be intrusted to other hands than his own.

"Thanks, but I prefer to keep it in my own possession until the true owner is discovered. If you admit having written it, that's quite another matter, so—what made you throw it away, when I insisted on your accepting our company on this little ride?"

"Who says I did that?"

For answer, Colonel Cougar uttered a shrill whistle, which was quickly answered by the entrance of a man whom Filley recognized as one Milo Plunkett, the colonel's right-bower, so to speak.

"You handed me this paper, Plunkett, I believe?" asked Cruger.

"I did, yes, colonel," bowed the young man.

"Tell us just how, and when, and where you found it, please."

"Just after we routed the red-skins, colonel. I saw Mr. Filley toss it in between a couple of rocks, and quietly picked it up. I gave it to you, just before we set out for this place."

"If necessary to do so, you could make oath that this is the same paper you picked up, after seeing Mr. Filley cast it aside?"

"I can."

"Be cautious, Plunkett. This is no trifling matter. A human life may hang in the balance, to be turned up or down by your oath."

"I can swear to the paper, colonel," was the confident reply.

"You mean by its contents, of course?"

"No, sir, for I never opened the paper to see what it might hold."

"Yet you can take your solemn oath that this, and none other, is the document you saw Anderson Filley throw away?" persisted Cruger.

"I do. I recognize it by the blot on the back; you can see it for yourself, colonel. Made by a thumb, wet with ink, I fancy."

Colonel Cruger laughed harshly as he flashed a glance toward his prisoner, to address him direct:

"That may fix the first ownership, Filley, even if your tongue tries to brazen it out. I've known a slighter clew to hang a man!"

The rancher shrugged his shoulders in silent scorn, turning partly away from his captor, though his ears may not have been the less open.

Lifting the paper to a clearer light, the colonel rapidly ran his eyes over the written lines, breaking the brief silence by a short, hard laugh, then saying:

"It is a list of names, purporting to be those of smugglers. My name heads the list as the chief. What do you think of that, Milo?"

"While your name being there is a lie, of course, colonel, I can only think this: Anderson Filley, while claiming to be an honest stockman, is really a spy in the employ of the Revenue Service!"

CHAPTER V.

THE COUGAR SHOWS HIS CLAWS.

THERE came a brief silence after that remark, during which both the colonel and his lieutenant gazed curiously toward the rancher, not unlike men who anticipate a hasty denial.

Instead, Anderson Filley maintained his indifferent attitude, like one who is utterly careless what opinion others may have formed concerning himself or his actions.

"That will do, Plunkett," finally spoke the colonel, with a nod of his head toward the door. "You can leave us. If I want you again, I'll call you after the same fashion."

The young man hesitated as one hand touched the fastening of the door, a slightly troubled look in his darkly handsome face. A question seemed upon his lips, but as Cruger made an impatient gesture, his next in command left the apartment without further speech.

Anderson Filley had turned in that direction as the opening door gave a faint squeak, but there was no sign of weakness visible in his bronzed countenance, and Darke Cruger frowned as he noted that fact.

He would have been far better pleased had the rancher once more burst into an appeal for his endangered family. This dogged composure boded ill for the plans he had formed.

"You heard what I said, Filley, and you heard what Plunkett said in explanation," he began his attack, speaking with deliberate composure, still holding that paper in his hand. "What have you to offer on your side, my noble friend and neighbor?"

No answer. Anderson Filley stood beside the chair from which he had risen shortly before, his hands resting lightly upon the wooden back. Then, as if unconsciously, his fingers closed and barely lifted the piece of furniture from the floor.

A glitter of fire leaped into those watchful dark eyes, and Colonel Cougar sneeringly asked:

"Is it heavy enough to make a good weapon, Filley? Bah! You're not altogether a fool, man! You're smart enough to know when you're beaten, so why sulk? Once more, what excuse have you to offer for hatching up a set of malicious lies, like this?"

One sinewy fore-finger sharply tapped the sheet of paper, but its owner waited in vain for a response. Anderson Filley had taken his course, and was doggedly following it to the end.

Recognizing this fact, the owner of Lone Ranch took another shift, his tone that of a deeply injured man.

"I never would have believed it of you, Filley, on any less positive proof. Why, man alive! it's one of the most damning outrages I ever heard tell of! I, a smuggler? I, the head and front of such an evil gang of lawbreakers? Surely you never intended to seriously press such an unfounded charge against me, old neighbor?"

Something like a sneering smile flashed across that stern visage, but never a word passed those firmly locked lips. The time might come for the accused to reply, but that time was not yet.

"A charge as absurdly impossible as it is outrageously false!" the colonel cried, his face flushing with anger which was slowly but surely gaining the upper hand of his prudence. "And to think that you, a man for whom I have en-

tertained feelings of no ordinary friendship, should be the one to father such an infamous lie!"

Anderson Filley cast a glance around the room, then at the severed cords which lay in the middle of the floor. His lips did not part, but words could not have spoken his meaning more clearly.

"Does that fact stick in your crop, Filley? Well, what else could I do, under the circumstances? You know what a blessed howl there has been kicked up of late over the smuggling of opium and fine goods across the line, and such a charge as this, no matter if utterly without foundation on facts, is enough to ruin a saint, let alone a common, every-day sort of fellow like me. And so—I brought you here, hoping that you would listen to reason."

"You call it reason? I call it outrage!"

Colonel Cougar tried to hide his pleasure at having at last found his captive's tongue, but his success was hardly perfect.

"That's natural enough, or would be, if you were innocent of the charge I'm bringing against you, Filley. Why did you make it? What cause have I given you for even suspecting I held a connection with smugglers, much less that I was their head and front?"

"Do you deny that connection, Colonel Cruger?"

"Deny it? Of course I do, man alive!"

"Then, if you are innocent, why commit an outrage like this? Why, unless to cover up your own guilty tracks?"

"Then you admit that this lying accusation is your work, Filley?"

"I admit nothing, sir. I simply asked you a question, in my turn."

"All right. I'll answer it. Why did I put you in bonds and fetch you here? Simply to protect myself against a base lie as ever man forged! Simply because I, nor any other living man, could afford to have such dangerous charges sent abroad concerning me. They are lies, all lies, and false as Hades itself! Still, it might be difficult for me to prove them such without losing both time and money."

"This is my excuse for acting as I have acted, Filley. Now it is your turn to offer an explanation. Why have you attempted to cut my throat after this cowardly fashion?"

Anderson Filley met that stern gaze without flinching. He must have seen the uselessness of flat denial in the face of such clear proof, but he was by no means cowed.

"You have treated me like a dog, Colonel Cruger. You have abused your strength, by taking me prisoner without reason or warrant. Worse than that, you have added to the great danger my family—Curse you, coward! I'll say no more until we can meet on equal terms again!"

"And those terms, neighbor?"

"Give me back the weapons you robbed me of. Open your doors and let me go forth, a free man. Do this, and I'll gladly face both you and your charges, with all your ruffianly gang to back you up!"

With half-closed lids, the colonel watched the rancher's face while these sentences flowed swiftly across his lips. Then he coldly answered:

"That's all very fine talk, Anderson, but it won't wash. You'll never touch earth again with living feet, unless you can read your title clear; not to mansions in the skies, but to truth here below. In other words, you stay here, a prisoner, until you can prove yourself a man worthy liberty."

"You'll never hold me long—alive, you cur!"

"Then I'll keep watch and ward over your grave!" fiercely retorted the colonel, springing to his feet as the rancher grasped the chair-back, like one who meditates a desperate assault.

"Don't you try that on, Filley," Cruger added, hastily, but in cooler and milder tones, putting up a warning hand. "Violence can't save you, but common sense may. Even if you were able to down me—which I deny—my boys would nip you at your first step across that threshold. Can't you see it, man?"

Filley made no reply in words, but his fingers relaxed their grip, and as Cruger resumed his seat, he did the same.

"I've pinned this foul calumny to your hand, Anderson Filley, and an ocean of denials on your part can't wash your record clear. I swear, what you already know, that it is all a lie, so far as I am concerned. I may not be an angel, but I do honest work for honest money. I can look any and all men in the face without blushing for myself, past or present. Still, I'm no fool. I know that I've got enemies: bitter, unscrupulous enemies who would be only too glad to jump at a chance like this to down me. And so—you are listening, Filley?"

"I hear you, but what's the use?"

"I'm coming to the main point, now. You're white, in spite of this unmanly trick, Filley. Even if you had good cause to think them guilty, you would never accuse a member of your own family of law-breaking."

A hot flush leaped into the rancher's face, then fled, to leave it paler than before. His voice sounded harsh and strange as he spoke:

"What do you mean by that, Colonel Cruger?"

"You have a daughter, Filley. I love Linda, and ask nothing better than to make her my wife."

For a single breath the rancher stared at his captor, hardly able to grasp his whole meaning, but when comprehension did come, it brought hottest rage in its wake, and he burst forth:

"You devil! Your wife! My girl? I'd rather a thousand times over see her dead and in her grave!"

Colonel Cruger showed no signs of flinching before that hot outburst, though he did lift a warning finger, lest the prisoner attempt to back his words by action.

"Go easy, Anderson Filley, if you care for your own bones! You'd rather see Linda dead than my wife, is it?"

"Yes, and if you weren't as utterly idiotic as you are evil, you'd know as much without my repeating it!"

"Well, I've marked your words, Filley, now you can make a note of mine. You'll never see your child again, living or dead, unless you come off your high-horse and swear by all you hold good and holy, that Linda Filley shall become my lawful wife!"

These were dangerous words to utter, in the face of such passion, but Darke Cruger hardly knew the meaning of the word fear, as applied to his own actions. And his glittering eyes seemed able to hold the rancher in check, so far as open violence was concerned.

It was different with his organs of speech however, and hotly came the words:

"Your wife? Give my pure, innocent girl to your arms? You? A thief, liar, smuggler, assassin!"

How much further he might have gone in his mad indignation can only be surmised, for he stopped short as a harsh laugh broke from the heavily bearded lips of his captor.

"Too late, old fellow!" the colonel cried, in savage triumph, like one who has gained a difficult point through strategy. "Smuggler, eh? Then you fairly admit being the author of this vile accusation, Anderson Filley?"

He whipped forth the blotted paper, but the rancher hardly gave it a passing glance. He was past all prudence or diplomacy now, and gave way to the fierce rage which had sprung up in his bosom.

"Yes, I admit the authorship!" he boldly cried, rising to his feet in imitation of the other's action. "You are a smuggler! You are the head and front of the devilish gang of lawbreakers which has done more harm to this part of the country than a dozen years of honesty can smooth over!"

"Well, well, if he don't act as though he really believed all this bosh!" muttered the colonel, as though to himself in his amazement.

"I not only believe, but I can prove every charge I have brought against you, Cruger!" madly raged the half-crazed rancher, his always hot temper fairly getting the upper hand of his prudence.

"And you dare tell me this? You, whose life I hold in my hand?" the colonel asked, with a peculiar smile dawning upon his stern visage.

"Bah! what care I for such vague threats, you cur!"

"If I was the criminal you say, mightn't I put threats into execution, though?" mocked the owner of the Lone Ranch.

"You mean—murder?"

"Call it punishment for treachery, dear fellow!"

"Even that wouldn't save you, you cur!" cried Filley, fairly beside himself for the time being. "You may murder me—'twould only befit your dastardly record—but there are others who—"

At last he saw whither his unbridled tongue was carrying him, for even a madman could not fail to rightly interpret that swift change of countenance before his glowing eyes. Filley clipped his words short, but the harm was already done.

A short, hard laugh broke from the colonel, and he said:

"Too late, old fool! So others know this precious secret, do they?"

Filley made no reply, though a less reckless man might well have shrunk from his madly-blazing eyes, his ghastly pale face, his tightly-clinched teeth.

"Others know, do they?" repeated Cruger, showing his teeth. "All right! I reckon I can give a guess as to those parties, and I'll take means to silence their tongues, as well as yours—"

With a catlike leap Anderson Filley was upon him, snatching the dagger from his belt and striking viciously as he cried:

"Die, you devil! Die!"

CHAPTER VI.

CAUGHT IN A DEATH-TRAP.

HARDLY one man out of a hundred could have escaped death at the hands of this maddened rancher, but Colonel Darke Cruger proved himself that exception, though even he was not able

to entirely foil Anderson Filley in his desperate effort at vengeance.

He lost his dagger, but agilely evaded that deadly stroke, at the same time dealing the rancher a blow that sent him reeling back; and with a harsh laugh, the colonel touched a hidden spring which caused a square of the flooring to open, and his prisoner fell through the trap, giving an involuntary cry of angry dismay as he disappeared from view.

The fall itself was not so great, but Anderson Filley was taken wholly by surprise, and had no time for nerving himself against the shock. He struck the stone-paved bottom on his feet, but then pitched backward, his unprotected head striking the rock wall with stunning force.

How long he lay unconscious, the rancher could only dimly guess, but when his senses began to rally, he found himself lying on his back, chilled to the bone, staring vaguely at a burning lamp which was suspended from the wall by an iron bracket.

For a few moments he was unable to recall aught that had happened, or even give a guess as to his whereabouts, but as he mechanically lifted his right arm, a clinking sound followed, and abruptly lifting himself to a sitting posture, his dazed eyes were caught by a gleaming blade at his side, from which the yellow rays of the lamp were reflected.

It was the dagger which he had snatched from the belt of Colonel Cougar, and that sight recalled the past.

With a hoarse, choking cry, Filley scrambled to his feet, weapon in hand, glaring about him in vain for his mocking enemy.

He was alone. Only the four walls, the stone floor, the dark ceiling through which he had been so adroitly dropped to—what?

A cold shiver ran through his frame as Anderson Filley asked himself that question, for there could be but one answer given: *to his death!*

That grim belief lent him fresh strength, however, for he was never a man to wholly despair so long as the breath of life remained. And, gripping that dagger firmly, he backed to a corner, his first impulse being to make sure no other diabolical snare was being prepared for his discomfiture.

The lamp only imperfectly lighted up that square cell, but its rays were sufficiently powerful to assure the rancher he alone occupied the den, and that fear set at rest for the time being, he permitted his gaze to dwell longer on an object over which his eyes had passed a few moments before: an iron-studded door set in one side of the cell.

He could see, without stirring from his present position, that the door was supplied with a heavy lock, and as his eyes grew better accustomed to the dim light, he noticed a darker spot, doubtless the keyhole through which that lock was manipulated.

He had time to take note of this much, but nothing more. A heavy footstep echoed on the floor above his head, and a moment later a tiny crack opened, as the faint light assured him.

"I say, old man!" came the well-known voice of Colonel Cougar, at the same instant. "Woke up yet, down there?"

"Come and see, you devil!" cried Filley, almost without thought, although an instant later, he felt sorry for his impetuosity.

Why had he not feigned insensibility? Might he not have drawn his enemy fairly within reach of his avenging weapon? But it was too late for such thoughts, now, and gripping his dagger tightly he waited the next move.

The trap-door was lifted higher, and the face of his enemy appeared at the opening, to give an affected start as he cried, sharply:

"Don't throw that dagger, you fool!"

Possibly the cast might have been made, only for that warning, for the rancher had drawn his arm back, every muscle strained. But now it lowered, its owner grimly retorting:

"Come down here if you want your blade, Darke Cruger. I'll give it to you—to the hilt!"

The colonel laughed lightly as he retorted:

"Keep it to let out your own hot blood, dear daddy. I've a better use for mine than to bathe your hands. I'm going to pay my sweet young bride a visit, don't you see?"

Uttering a savage cry, the rancher crouched, then leaped upward with all his powers, striking as he came, hoping against hope that he might be able to make his blade strike home. It was a marvelous effort in one of his age and build, and despite his courage, the smuggler started back with an involuntary cry as he saw that flashing steel.

He rallied as quickly, covering his actual fear with mockery.

"Oh, don't! How can you be so impetuous, my dear daddy—that-is-to-be? Why, I'm all a-shiver with— Didn't bark your shins, I trust?"

Anderson Filley picked himself up from where he had fallen, having struck heavily against the further wall. If hurt, he gave no signs to that effect, glaring upward at his mocking enemy, only lacking opportunity to stain his hands with heart's-blood.

"Sulky, eh? Well, mayhap you'll be in a more amiable mood the next time I call. By

the way, what message shall I deliver to your wife? I omit Linda, for her dainty little ears will hardly hold all the sweet sayings I've been storing up for her delectation. Still, if you insist, I'll give her your love."

"You devil! If I could only reach you—just once!"

"But you can't, so what's the sense in raving, daddy? You surely ought to be able to cool off, down there; but perhaps I haven't given you quite enough rope. I'll leave you longer, this time, for—Linda sweet will be my excuse for tarrying."

"Harm her—"

"Couldn't think of it, even at your request, Filley. I know a far better use to put the dainty little darling to, I assure you! And now I really must be going."

He made a feint as though closing the trap, but quickly raised it again to add, as if by an after-thought:

"I say, Filley, if Linda and the old lady join their prayers to mine, won't you listen to reason? Won't you make the best of what can't be mended otherwise, and amid the merry wedding bells—"

A fierce curse cut him short, and in hoarse, barely articulate tones, the tortured rancher flung upward:

"You're on top, now, but lock out, you devil! I'll drain your black heart dry if ever you—"

"Bah!" interrupted the colonel, in his turn. "You'll be dead and in your grave, man, dear! You can't get out o' that without help, and I'll take precious good care no one lends you a hand. Better lie down and die quietly, for you'll never leave this den alive!"

Without waiting for a reply, Colonel Cougar closed the trap, and as he listened, Filley distinctly heard him applying some sort of fastening, as though to make assurance doubly sure. Then his footsteps crossed the room above, to die out as a door slammed shut.

For many minutes Anderson Filley was too deeply wrought up to do aught but silently rage at his dastardly enemy, and the better part of an hour had crawled by before he renewed his examination of his place of living burial.

During that long interval, his thoughts were dark and gloomy, but only a few of them need find a record in these lines.

He knew that Darke Cruger was head and front of a smuggling band, and indisputable proof having fallen in his way, he resolved to aid law and order to the best of his ability.

Making a list of the names of those whom he had convinced himself were working in concert with the chief of the smugglers, he added such other information as would likely prove of use to the authorities, and set out to mail those charges; only to be driven back by the Sioux, to fall into the hands of the very men whom he was denouncing.

Fearful lest the paper be discovered in some manner, he had cast it aside, as he fancied unseen, only to have it picked up and handed the chief one concerned, by Milo Plunkett. And now!

For himself he cared comparatively little. But his blood ran cold when he thought of what fate might lie in store for his family. Only Maurice knew aught of his recent discoveries, but—would the women be spared by this arch-villain?

"Out! I must get out!" he hoarsely raged, pacing the limits of his cell with the wild restlessness of a caged leopard.

In vain he attempted to find a place where he might lift himself high enough to attack the floor above with his dagger. The walls had been carefully and thoroughly built, and he could not find resting-place for even a toe or a finger-tip.

Only the iron-studded door in the side-wall remained, and for the dozenth time he came to a pause in front of this, tapping the hard oak wood with his weapon.

What was it for? Upon what did it open? Surely there could be no thoroughfare beyond?

He mechanically shook his head at this mental query, for, as he recalled the ranch and its surroundings, he knew only too well that he was below the surface of the ground, and that no building of any sort lay in that direction.

"What is it for, then?" he asked himself once more, at the same time testing his blade on the hard wood, which proved only less inflexible than the iron bolts and lock itself. "Another den? If so, what—Ha!" as a ray of light seemed to flash upon his puzzled brain. "The place where they hide opium and other smuggled articles!"

That seemed the most likely solution, and yet it presented some difficulties. If so, why had Colonel Cougar cast him into the adjoining pit? Was he so certain that death alone could share any discoveries he might make in his desperation?

That might very well be, but Anderson Filley was not one to sit down and meekly yield to misfortune. While he lived, he would hope, and hoping, would work for liberty.

Finding that his dagger, keen though that was of point and of edge, could make little impression

on the iron-like oak wood, the rancher turned his attention to the lock, trying to pick it, to shoot back the heavy bolt with its point.

His hopes of ultimate escape were growing, now that he believed the smugglers' store-house lay beyond this door. That once opened, might he not be able to find a mode of exit from the adjoining cell?

It was at least possible, and even so frail a chance was richly worth toiling for, he told himself.

For many minutes he persisted in using his dagger on bolt and on lock, but at the end of that time even his courage began to fail him. Time was so precious, with that pitiless demon at liberty to scheme and work his evil will on those innocent ones!

If he only had a key! If he had but a— Ha! His hands were mechanically fumbling in his pockets, and in one he found a slender yet strong nail. Might that not serve as a pick-lock?

No sooner imagined than attempted. Filley quickly bent the nail, and inserted the point in the keyhole. A dozen times he was foiled, but stubbornly persisted, changing the bend to suit his shifting belief, for now he felt convinced that only through this door could he hope to join and guard his loved ones.

Desperation lent his fingers doubled power, and at length, as the crooked nail seemed to catch the wards firmly, he gave a tremendous wrench—and succeeded!

Gladder sound never met mortal ears than was that reluctant creak as the heavy bolt moved back, almost far enough to clear the iron socket in the solid stone. Then, one more wrench, and the deed was done!

A sudden faintness crept over the rancher as he realized this fact, and for a brief space he was too weak to press his success further. He staggered dizzily back, one hand clasping his furiously throbbing temples, a mist dropping over his eyes.

Then—could he believe his eyesight?

The heavy door swung toward him, and a fetid puff of air came into his cell, turning him still fainter for the moment. And before he could spring forward to the opening, a long, lithe body shot through it, and a powerful mountain lion stood revealed, showing its teeth in a vicious snarl as it crouched for a death-leap!

CHAPTER VII.

DOING HIS DUTY.

OBEDIENCE proved very bitter to Maurice Filley, just then, and when the parting moment came, his eyes were so blinded with tears that he could do little toward guiding his mount.

Fortunately the colt had been his particular pet from foaling, and was so intelligent that he seemed to divine his young master's will by instinct. He gave a little whimper at leaving old Morgan, but then stretched out as though the long chase for life had but that instant begun.

The clump of stunted trees and wind-bent bushes stood at the head of a limited tract of uneven ground, and if only their own lives had been at stake, the rancher could hardly have found a more favorable spot for turning at bay than right there. But there *was* more, far more, and even so soon after parting from his father, Maurice had to keep recalling that fact to keep himself true to the line marked out for him by that parent, never so dearly loved as now.

A shrill *yi-yip-yip-yip!* rung sharply in his ears, and dashing a hand across his eyes, the lad turned for a backward glance, to give vent to a snarl of fierce vengeance that was deeper-seated than most boys of his age would be capable of feeling, as he saw several Indians wildly lashing their wiry ponies along upon his track.

Scarce knowing what he did, Maurice shook his clinched hand in mad defiance, lifting his voice in a fierce yell of derision.

"Come on, ye imps! The more the better! Come on, all of you! But the whole of ye'll never go back on your own legs!"

For the moment thinking only of luring the entire gang upon his own track and away from that of his father, Maurice gave the colt notice to slacken his pace, to lend the impression that his bolt was well-nigh shot.

Keen-eyed as crows, the Sioux yelled afresh as they began to gain, but by that time the chase had swept far enough past the first of the uneven ground for Maurice to see that only four of the Indians were following him.

"The rest— Oh, father!"

That was a moment bitter as death, and once again the poor lad's eyes were dimmed with unshed tears. How could he race to life and liberty, leaving his parent to do battle against such heavy odds?

"Save them—you must save them, boy!"

The words rung through his ears, and Maurice felt almost as though his father was calling them aloud, just as he had done before that separation. He gave a great start and a choking cry as he stared around for that father, but then he rallied. Though absent, Anderson Filley was

still commanding him to do his duty as son and brother.

"I will—I'll mind, daddy!" he muttered, huskily, as he cleared his eyes once more, and touched up the colt with his armed heels. "I'll save mother and sister if it lays in the wood, but then—I'll have pay for you, if those—if they—"

Fiercely though his passions were raging, Maurice could not shape those terrible words, even in his mind, but, all the same, an oath of bitter vengeance was recorded against the Sioux, in case their hands shed blood, so precious in his sight, that day.

When that ride began, Maurice Filley was but a gay, laughter-loving lad. If he lived to reach home again, he would be a man, in all but in years.

He resolutely put aside all distracting thoughts, giving himself up to the duty assigned him by his father. Until that duty was fully performed, he must consider nothing else whatever.

He touched up his colt, riding for nearly a mile before taking another glance over a shoulder, but then a frown wrinkled his brows. He believed he had gained a few rods of ground on the red-skins, and that without pressing his mount to the utmost, while each of the quartet was lashing his pony with hot and merciless fury.

His brain worked rapidly, but clearly. He knew that, long as was the path to their home, he must gain a greater start than this rate of winning indicated, or those red demons would surely fall upon them ere they could hope to reach the haven of safety mentioned by Anderson Filley.

"Steady, boy!" he muttered, turning the colt slightly from a direct course, heedless of the yelling imps pressing them so hard. "You've got to stand it, old fellow! There's more than your or my life hanging in the balance, this bout, and— Yelp on, ye dirty dogs!"

With a burst of passion, Maurice flung up his rifle and took a snap-shot at the Sioux, though each brave ducked low along their ponies' necks at his first movement. The bullet sped wide, as was to have been expected, but that loss was balanced by the few yards the lad gained by running free while they handicapped their mustangs thus.

Maurice was now heading toward a point far to the west of his home, but he believed he was acting all for the best, and as the Sioux braves veered to correspond, he put the colt to his best speed.

If he could outfoot them on this line, well and good; when distanced in the race, they would still be too far away from the ranch to find it before he could bury his mother and sister away to a place of comparative security. If fate was against him, however, and he should fall—

"Well, they'll be so far off the line that maybe God'll keep them from straying that way!"

It was a long and a hard chase. At any other time, or with only his own life at stake, Maurice Filley would have yielded to pity for his noble colt, but now he could only pat that sweat-dripping neck with a tremulous hand, muttering cheering, pitying words, but still pressing the gallant animal to his utmost speed.

Little by little the Sioux began to string out, instead of riding in a small clump. Under white riders, the ponies would long since have been distanced. As it was, only one of the braves came anything near to holding his own with the light-weighted colt.

With each mile that distance increased, so far as the three red-skins were concerned, but Maurice began to look more anxious as he saw that, while the colt was laboring heavily, that muscular mustang seemed running just as freely as at first!

By this time the afternoon was well spent, and the chase had led far away from the direct line to the Filley Ranch. The prairie had long since been lost sight of, and the lad was now fairly among the hills, though he had so shaped his course as to avoid the more difficult and dangerous ground.

At length he could no longer detect aught of the three Indians, and he believed they were completely thrown out of the race. Still, might it not be possible that they would, by accident or through prior knowledge, strike the home where his mother and sister were defenseless?

This fear led Maurice to plan a bold stroke, and taking advantage of the first favorable piece of ground, he drew rein, leaping from the saddle and running back a few rods along his own trail, to drop down behind a rock standing amidst bushes, through the tops of which he stood ready to fire the instant his persistent pursuer should come so near that failure would be hardly possible.

In another minute the stern deed was accomplished!

Only pausing long enough to be sure the savage was past giving him further trouble, Maurice returned to his colt, and mounting, struck off at a sharp angle through the hills.

Once only did he hesitate, and then but for a brief space.

"Too late!" he muttered, huskily, resigning the thought. "Either he has won clear, and is now at home watching for me, or—"

Even in thought he could not pronounce that terrible alternative.

From each point of rising ground across which he passed, the lad looked for signs of the red-skins whom he had distanced, but none such came to his eyes. Apparently they had abandoned the chase entirely to their better-mounted comrade.

Still, it was possible that they might try to follow his trail, and should they do so as far as the corpse of that comrade, Maurice knew enough of Indian nature to feel assured they would turn themselves to veritable bloodhounds, but what they would have revenge on the slayer.

For this reason he gave considerable time to breaking his trail, picking out rocky tracts to pass over, and finally entering the little river, after making a long angle away from his home course. For nearly half a mile he forced the jaded colt to wade far enough from shore to leave no telltale signs of their passage, and lost a few other minutes in searching for a place where they might abandon the stream without leaving betraying signs behind them.

All of this consumed time, and it was fairly dark when the youngster actually headed for home once more.

Naturally his brain was racked with anxiety, but he told himself that, through all, he had acted for what he believed was the best. True, he might have reached home some little time before the sun set, had he headed direct, but to do that would almost surely have led the Sioux to the ranch, since he could hardly have disposed of the four, as he had of the lone brave.

In fear and trembling Maurice rose in his stirrups to catch the earliest possible glimpse of their house, and as he saw the bright lamp-light gleaming through the open door and shutterless windows, the reaction caused him to droop dizzily in the saddle.

With a glad whimper, the colt quickened his pace, and it was only when his sister sprang through the doorway with a glad greeting, that Maurice was able to rally. Truly there was need of it, too, for, after that first greeting call, Linda Filley innocently dealt him a bitter wound by calling out:

"Where's father, Maurice? For shame! you've run away from him!"

"Yes, I've— Mother!" hoarsely cried the lad, abandoning the colt and staggering to the open door. "Quick! pick up what things you need for a night out, and leave this! The Sioux have—"

"Anderson—your father, boy!" sharply, yet tremulously cried Mrs. Filley, springing across the room to catch the arm of her son. "He is not— Why don't he come, too?"

"He's coming, mother, as soon as he can gather help," Maurice forced himself to utter, at the same time bravely meeting that loving, terrified gaze. "He sent me on ahead to take you both to the cave—you know what I mean, mother!"

"Yes, but—"

"There's no time for talking, mammy, darling," yet stealing a moment in which to gently stroke that pale cheek. "Linda! make haste, sister! Dump grub in a basket, and take what valuables you can carry without too much trouble. We've all got to get there—just got to!"

Wiser words might have been chosen, perhaps, but the poor boy was nearly beside himself, now that his last hope for his father seemed destroyed. For, had Anderson Filley fought clear of the red-skins, he surely would have reached home before this!

Gathering up a liberal supply of food, together with all extra weapons, and such valuables as they could carry in their arms, mother, daughter and son left the darkened home behind them, picking their way with hurried steps through the gloom of early night.

Bending under his load of food and blankets, Maurice led the way, heading direct for the cave which had accidentally come to their knowledge only a few weeks before, long as they had lived in its vicinity.

He urged the women to haste, for, after what he had that day witnessed, there was no telling at what moment a band of bloodthirsty savages might pounce down upon the ranch. And yet, eager as he was to get them to a place of comparative safety, he dreaded the moments which must follow.

How could he tell them the terrible truth? He could not do it! He would lie to them, but— what should he say? How satisfy their natural anxieties! How—

With so much to dishearten him, it is a wonder the poor, brave lad did not break down entirely.

The cavern was reached without further trouble than that given them by the nature of the ground, intensified by the gloom. So far not a sound had come to add to their fears. But Maurice was dreading most what must come when they were fairly settled within that refuge.

In his desperation, Maurice silently dropped

the bundle of candles which he had brought, close to a niche in the wall near the entrance, for he knew he could never school his face under a clear light, however he might train his tongue to lie.

"Your father, son!" his mother asked, turning upon him the moment they entered the cave. "He is not—not dead?"

CHAPTER VIII.

A RISKY BIT OF WORK.

As she caught that question, Linda uttered a faint cry, sobbing:

"Oh, mother, don't—don't talk so!"

"Be still, child," almost harshly commanded the mother, adding to her son, who silently yielded to her grasp on his arm. "Tell me, son; why did not Anderson come home with you?"

Now that the critical moment had come, Maurice faced it bravely enough, and in tones the steadiness of which fairly surprised himself, he made answer:

"Because he couldn't, mother, dear. Don't worry, please, but—he told me to do just this! He said for me to hurry home and look after both of you. He said not to worry: that he was going to fetch help; that the Indians had broken out in force, and—"

"Maurice, you are speaking truly?" interrupted Mrs. Filley, her doubts rising stronger as the lad's voice thickened in his throat. "Surely you would not lie to your mother, even to—your father is alive and well?"

"He was alive and well, mother, when I left him. I hated to do it, but—he said I just must come alone! He said, tell you he would be back, with help, just as soon as he possibly could."

"Then—he was in danger when you left him, Maurice?"

"No," bravely lied the poor lad. "We met a man who told us the Sioux Indians had broken out. We did catch a far-off glimpse of what may have been a squad of them, and that's why father sent me on ahead."

Maurice slipped from her grasp, unable to bear more, just then, but dark as it was, his mother detected his purpose of leaving the cave, and once more checked his steps with a quick clutch, asking:

"You are going—where, Maurice?"

"Outside, to watch for father's coming, mammy, dear," was the coaxing response. "You're perfectly safe in here, don't you know it? But father will be anxious, and so—please let me go, mother!"

There was a brief hesitation on her part, then her grasp relaxed, and Mrs. Filley said:

"Well, for that, Maurice; but be careful, dear! Don't go far, and don't stay long. You know how—"

But Maurice did not wait to hear the ending. He felt choking for air, although the cavern was spacious and fairly dry. He must get away to a place where he might give free vent to his pent-up emotions without stint, or he felt as though he would go crazy!

The cavern was situated at the edge of the rising ground, rough and rocky hills rising back of it, rolling away until the river was reached which poured a goodly flood into the Mississippi.

The sorely tortured lad breasted this rising ground, scaling it blindly, staggering like one drunken. He knew not whither he was going, and cared even less. All he could think of was his father, his nearly certain fate, and of the lies he had forced himself to tell his poor mother, who might even then be a widow!

If the lad paused once or twice to cast a glance in the direction of the home they had so hastily abandoned, it was almost unconsciously.

What matter to him if the Sioux should pounce down upon and give that home over to the flames? What matter their property? What matter anything, longer?

Under the most favorable circumstances, the absence of Anderson Filley, at such a time, would have been sorely felt by his son, for the bond of love was unusually strong between them; but after such a parting as theirs had been, thought was torture, memory was little short of madness!

And yet, the truth must be told in the end. His mother, his sister, both must know how and under what circumstances that parting had taken place, and once they knew all—

"They'll hate the very sight of my lying face!" the poor lad moaned, sinking upon the cool, damp ground, almost burying his face in the leaf mold as he shivered in mental agony. "Poor mother! Will she—Don't curse me, mammy, darling! I couldn't help it! Father made me go from him, and I—Oh, God! Save him—send him back to us, I pray!"

How long he lay groveling thus, Maurice Filley never knew, though it must have been many long minutes. How long he might have lain thus is none the easier to decide, had not a thought of the main purpose of their disastrous trip flashed across his tortured mind.

That memory caused him to spring to his feet, shaking a clinched hand in the direction of the Lone Ranch, as he muttered hoarsely

"Only for you, Colonel Cougar! Only for—if harm has come to my poor father, you shall pay for it all! I swear it, before heaven!"

The very intensity of his hatred toward the criminal whose evil doings had helped to bring about such bitter misfortunes, helped clear the brain and restore the bodily powers of the tortured youth, and his fierce vow was hardly uttered before he gave a quick start, shading his eyes with a curved palm, and gazing breathlessly through the darkness and moonlight which lay in strips and patches between himself and a bright point of light which—

"Gone!" as that light vanished as rapidly as it had appeared. "Can it be that the Indians have—What would they be making such a signal for? Where am I, anyway?"

It took but an instant for Maurice to fix his location, and as he recognized his surroundings, he caught himself wondering how he had passed so far away from the cavern, without a memory remaining.

He was not far away from the high, rock-bound bank of the river, and the light he had caught sight of came from a point almost directly on that bank. Surely it must have been a signal of some description, but what, and given by whom?

Unable to answer those questions with any degree of satisfaction, Maurice stole toward that point, almost unconsciously, as he watched for a repetition of the signal, if signal it had been.

The distance was not great, and his sense of locality was acute, while the lay of the ground between was fairly favorable for playing the spy, especially to one who possessed an inborn talent for scouting, as did young Filley. And hence it came about that when the next brief flash of light was given, Maurice was near enough to catch a glimpse of the signaler.

"It's a white man's rig-out, anyway!" he decided, his interest growing still greater. "Not an Indian? Then—Smuggling by glory!"

That thought was sufficient to send the lad ahead once more, for his native dislike to Colonel Darke Cruger had by this time grown to almost savage hatred. Only for him! Only for his evil doings, Anderson Filley would be safe and sound, with his family!

The thought that he might thus pick up another important link in the chain of proof against his enemy, urged Maurice forward, causing him to temporarily forget his waiting mother and sister, with all their fears and anxieties.

It did not take him many minutes more to creep up close enough to see that there were two men, both white, judging from their garments as they shifted their position, passing through a patch of moonlight as they did so. But that was all he could be sure of: he failed to see their faces, and by that uncertain light he could not recognize their figures, even if those ought to be familiar to his eyes.

Only for his burning hatred for Colonel Cougar, and the hope of learning more against his record, Maurice would hardly have run the risk of stealing closer. But, where he now crouched in the dense shadow, he could barely catch a low, indistinct murmur as the two men conversed together, and they had settled down like men waiting the arrival of some expected party.

Since they showed no inclination to alter their position for his benefit, Maurice silently backed away until he could steal around on the other side, where the ground lay more favorably for his purpose. And at the first of his pauses while so creeping, the lad caught a word or two which would have induced him to run still greater risks, if necessary: the name of his father, coupled with a vicious oath!

In his burning eagerness to learn what evil they could be plotting against his parent, Maurice forgot a bit of his prudence, and a small stone was dislodged by his knee, falling into a crevice with a little clatter, causing the men to start, and stare keenly in that direction.

The young scout lay motionless in the shadow, fairly stilling his breath as he made ears do the duty caution denied his eyes; but nothing serious came of it, and when satisfied that the men did not mean to investigate further, the lad once more crept forward.

In a few minutes more he had gained a point from whence he could catch the louder words spoken by the two men, though here and there he lost nearly as many more, making it no easy matter to follow their train of thought.

Still, he heard sufficient to convince him that they were by no means the warmest possible friends to his father, since that name only came to be coupled with a curse.

"The boss'll fix him out, ef it shows that way, an' don't you miss thinkin' it, pardner!" came one coarse voice, as its owner shifted his position slightly. "Ef old Filley reckons he kin—"

The rest was lost to the breathlessly-listening spy, but he dared not attempt to improve his position. Even as it was, the fellows could hardly move about much without discovering his presence.

So it ran on for several minutes. By the snatches he caught, young Filley felt morally certain these rascals belonged to Colonel Cougar's gang of smugglers, and that they strongly suspected Anderson Filley of playing the spy upon their movements.

He learned, too, that at least one of the fellows was stationed there that night to signal a smuggling party that the coast was clear for them to cross the river, for, with words sufficient to hint as much, he rose to his feet and slid back the mask of a dark lantern, sending a brief shaft of light out over the river bank.

Fearful lest his spying be discovered, and finding small chance for learning more, Maurice cautiously backed away, moving down the river bank as being the best suited for his purpose, just then.

Unfortunately he had lingered just a few minutes too long, for he was yet dangerously near the smugglers, when the time came for their parting. Unluckily, too, Maurice was a bit too far off to catch the words which might have warned him in time to flee with greater haste. All he knew was that both men rose erect, and fearing lest they sight him, he lay motionless where the shadow was most dense.

"That's them, I reckon!" said one of the couple, as an answering gleam came from the further shore of the stream. "Well, I'll be mogging 'long my way, pardner. Only wish't was yourn, though!"

"I'll drink a swallow for you, pardner," chuckled the other, sending forth a final flash from his lantern, then blowing out the light as though its services would no longer be needed.

"Be good to yourself, and if you happen to stumble across old Filley, just add a kick and a lick on my account, will you?"

"Then you honestly reckon—"

"I'd go my head on it, man!" with an angry viciousness in his tones which Maurice caught as he lay there listening greedily. "The boss can do as he likes, of course, but my eyes hain't blinded by a petticoat, and so I say it again: Anderson Filley is playing us dirt!"

"Waal, ef that's so, reckon he'll go into a sudden sickness, one o' these 'long-come-shortlies!" grimly chuckled the other knave, as he set off at a rapid pace through the night, leaving his mate to move more leisurely in the opposite direction.

Not until that instant did Maurice Filley fairly realize his full danger, but his pulse beat a bit faster as he saw that the signal-man was moving almost directly toward the spot where he was lying!

Would he pass him by without discovery? It was a slim chance, but nothing better offered than to chance it. Of course he was armed, and at such short range, even the darkness would not ruin his aim at a fleeing spy. Then, waiting could hardly make matters worse, if a discovery was inevitable.

One's brain works swiftly in such emergencies, and so with Maurice Filley. He simply prepared himself for action in case of need, so far as he could without surely betraying his presence. Then—

The signal-man actually tripped over the lad! And, dealing him a heavy blow alongside the jaw as he fell with a fierce curse, Maurice Filley leaped to his feet and took to hasty flight. Too hasty, alas!

His foot came down on a loose stone, causing him to pitch heavily forward, and with a wild cry of terror, he rolled over the precipice!

CHAPTER IX.

WHEAT SMUGGLER DUKE FOUND.

"Go easy—don't rush it so brash, mate! Ye can't know—"

"If I can't, Duke can, Sabe Wolfert," came the retort, in less carefully modulated tones than that hurried warning. "A body'd think the timber was chuck-full of red-skins, each and every one of them wild for bloody hair!"

"Mebbe they be, an' mebbe they's wuss, Mart Westgate. Mebbe I'm a blame ole fool, an' mebbe you're heap sight smarter'n the common run o' human critters, but—"

"But I'm banking on the good judgment of Smuggler Duke, just now, old fellow, and as he says nothing, so I say all's well and coming just as we want it should. There's nothing wrong about the cache, and all we have to do is to pull out the canoe, float it, then wait for the sign that all's serene on the other shore."

Two men were forcing their way through the dark woods and drawing near to the bank of the river, at this point offering a shore far more accessible than were the nearly perpendicular rocks opposite.

They seemed perfectly familiar with their course, gloomy though it was there beyond the reach of the moonlight, and scarcely rendered darker by the gathering clouds which so frequently drifted over the face of the moon itself.

Both appeared strong, active men, if not in the prime of life, easily bearing their packs, and threading the tangled woods with a celerity and lack of noise which proclaimed them natural woodsmen. But now, as they drew nearer the river which they intended crossing, their manner showed up differently, and he who had until then taken the lead now held back, growing irritable at his companion's lack of caution.

"I tell ye, mate, it's ag'inst all reason!" he protested, only to be flung the light, careless retort:

"Put reason in your pipe and smoke it, Sabe Grumbler! I'm steering by instinct, and—Ah, good old dog!"

With a subdued rumble—neither bark, growl nor whine—a huge St. Bernard reared up before its master, lightly touching him on each shoulder with a mighty paw, then dropping back on all-fours with wagging tail, once more leading the way.

"Durn the critter! what ye reckon he means by sech doin's?"

"Says I'd ought to lend you a bat in the mouth for trying to make him out a puppy of no sense at all, Sabe Wolfert," retorted Westgate, with a light chuckle. "Come on, old growler! Everything's lovely, and in less than an hour from now, you'll be down on your marrowbones, begging Smuggler Duke to spare you a weenty bit of his good dog-sense!"

With the last words, Martin Westgate broke through the shrubbery and stood upon the river-bank, gazing directly across, without heeding either of his comrades, human or beast.

"Don't see nothin', do ye, mate?" whispered Wolfert, only his head projecting beyond cover, for the old Indian-fighter was nothing if not cautious.

"That's just what I do see: nothing, and plenty of it!" muttered Westgate, with a trace of angry impatience underlying his guarded speech. "This is the right point, I can make oath, and it's even later than we agreed upon, but—All right, and I told you so!"

There was both relief and triumph in his tones just then, for from the high bank across the river, came a bright if brief flash, and the smuggler knew that all was going well for them.

Producing a tiny dark-lantern and opening the slide, Martin Westgate answered that signal, then plunged under cover for a brief space, to reappear with a bark canoe in his arms.

"Dump your pack and tumble in, old growler," he said to Wolfert, as the seemingly frail craft was placed upon the water. "Unless you're so much ashamed of your evil croakings that—Hellow!"

Unusual and startling sounds came to their ears from the other shore, and with a half-whine of dismal pleasure at the likelihood of his evil predictions being realized, the old Indian-fighter croached in his end of the canoe, grasping pistols in place of paddle.

A sharp, inarticulate cry, followed by a heavy fall, almost certainly into the river; then a human voice giving vent to savage oaths; then silence most profound.

"Back to river, man!" sibilated Sabe Wolfert, as Martin Westgate gave a dip with his paddle which sent the canoe clear of the shore.

"Shut up!" came the forcible but guarded retort. "Go seek, Duke! Easy—play fish, good fellow!"

Without a splash loud enough to reach keen ears a dozen yards off, the St. Bernard slipped over the edge of the canoe into the water, vanishing from sight almost immediately.

At the same time his master aided the current with his paddle, sending the birch far downstream, then holding the craft almost stationary while he bent a listening ear for further sounds from shore.

All this took but little time, and even Sabe Wolfert had hardly occasion to turn impatient before a signal came from the further bank.

"Jack Broome, or some other fellow has borrowed his whistle!" instantly decided Westgate, then bending his face close to the water, and forming a funnel with his palms, he answered that signal.

"Say where that comes from, pardner, and I'll take off my hat to you as heap sight smarter than the law allows!" he muttered, chucklingly, as he lifted his head, to sweep the shore with keen eyes.

"Ef you ketch a bullet—"

"Oh, quit croaking, man! Does that look as though a trap was waiting for us?" his tones catching a ring of triumph as a flash of clear light came through the gloom, now almost universal as the clouds grew thicker in front of the moon.

Wolfert merely growled deep down in his throat, for he, too, could not help recognizing the signal as that given by a friend and ally.

"Dip when I do, Sabe!" muttered Westgate, preparing to return the signal with his lantern. "It's all right, of course, but—no harm to keep on the safe side, you know!"

The instant that signal was returned, the two smugglers dipped their paddles deeply, sending the canoe across and downward, far away from the spot so recently marked. And waiting for nothing further, the comrades paddled to the other shore, then lay silently waiting for what might come next.

Surely something out of the usual course had transpired, yet that happening could hardly be very disastrous, since Jack Broome, fellow-knave and smuggler, was still on deck and not too badly frightened to make use of the signals so carefully agreed upon when a hint was sent

forth that evil eyes were on the alert in that section.

Westgate chuckled softly in his beard as a bright light flashed forth close to the river's edge, some rods above the spot where the birch was harbored.

"Not such a fool, Jacky, old son! But, now that you've proved it's safe enough for better men, shall we, Sabe?"

Without waiting for a reply, Westgate gave a signal which quickly brought the signal-man that way, breaking into a vicious snarl as he caught a vague glimpse of the canoe and its occupants.

"Why the deuce didn't you answer? Think I've got nothing better to do than to prance up and down—"

"Oh, switch off, you! What did you expect? That we'd come straight on to help you kick up such a racket? What's the matter with you, anyway Jack Broome?"

"Matter enough, and so you'll say unless you're bigger fools than ought to belong to the gang," growled the signal-man, his uneasiness growing more distinct as time passed. "We've been watched by a cursed spy—that's what's the matter with me!"

"What! you don't— Out with it all, you infernal donkey!" gratingly spoke Westgate, losing all flippancy of speech and manner at that startling assertion.

"It's out, ain't it? Some critter was playing spy, an' I've got a jaw on me bigger'n a Government mule, where he hit me a clip when—"

"What was that splash in the water?"

"When? I didn't— When?"

"Hark!"

Through the night there came a sharp bark, followed almost immediately by a long-drawn, melancholy howl.

"Duke has found something, and I'd alm st lay odds— Did you knock or throw anybody over the bank into the drink, Jack?"

"Me? Never did anything of the sort! I was moving down this way, after giving you the sign all was right, when a devil of some sort tripped me up and knocked me down and—"

"durned if I know just what-all he didn't do to me!"

Jack Broome broke off with a snarl of disgust, pressing one hand to his injured jaw. Only for the gloom which wrapped them up, his mates might have read something of the truth in those knuckle-marks!

Again that wailing howl came floating through the night, and with a smothered ejaculation, Martin Westgate left the canoe, giving its prow a jerk which dragged it securely upon the shingly shore.

"Duke's found something, and I'm going to see just what!" he muttered, giving his belt of weapons a hitch, then making sure his dark-lantern was in good working order. "You can come or stay, just as you like: I'm going to Smuggler Duke!"

"The fool dog's yowl'tin' 'c'ase he's got a foot wet, an' don't—"

"You're a liar, Sabe Wolfert!" angrily snarled the dog's master, with a glance over his shoulder as he set forth on his mission of exploration. "Duke's calling me, and he never lies. That's heap sight more than can be said of you or Jack Broome!"

Hard words, but those who accepted them knew how ready the speaker was to back up his opinions, and without open resentment, they silently followed his lead.

The distance was not great, but the traveling was difficult after the first few rods were covered. The shore grew less shelving and more abrupt, masses of rock which had fallen from the high bank, barring the way now and then, and at times they had to proceed by using hands even more than their feet.

At brief intervals that mournful howl was given, starting soft and low, gradually rising to the weird, then dying away in sad notes that caused more than one shiver to creep up and down the spines of the two sullen smugglers following Duke's master.

The breeze was blowing in their faces, from the spot where the dog was as yet unseen, but if his scent was at fault, Duke heard their approach, and sent back an ominous growl, which only ceased when his master gave a reassuring whistle.

A quick, joyous bark came back, and Westgate muttered:

"He's found something, sure, or Duke'd come instead of sending his bark. Look to your guns, lads, though I reckon there's no danger. Duke don't give a hint that way, and I'm swearing by him, you mind!"

Turning a rocky point, Westgate drew the mask from his lantern, casting a broad fan of light in advance, giving a short ejaculation as his eyes caught sight of two figures: one human, the other canine.

Smuggler Duke was squatting by the side of a youthful figure which lay partly in the lipping waters, just as though the noble dog had dragged it to land.

It was the figure of a boy, his eyes closed, his face looking deathlike and ghastly beneath that light. In one hand he clutched a broken branch, as though he had sought to save himself from

falling further by catching at bush or tree in passing.

"Good lad, Duke!" spoke Westgate, giving the St. Bernard an approving pat on the head, then bending closer over that motionless figure. "White-skin, and hardly weaned, but—I say, Jack Broome!"

"Who is it?" demanded that worthy, pressing forward in turn, to give an ugly curse as his eyes fairly took in that vision.

"You know him then, Jack?" demanded Westgate.

"Know him? It's young Filley, and his father— Out o' the way, Mart Westgate!" his voice growing still more vicious as one hand gave the sturdy fellow a rude shove, a wicked-looking knife flashing from its sheath under the grip of the other.

"Steady, Jack! What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean? I mean to cut his spying heart out, that's what I mean! I mean to pay him back for— He watched us, up yonder, and heard too much to be let run longer!"

And with death in his face, with murder in his heart, Jack Broome bent forward to stab that helpless boy!

CHAPTER X.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER IN HIS GLORY.

In his generous wish to give another a chance for his life, White-horse Wheeler had recklessly run his own neck into deadly peril, and as he turned Whirlygust aside to keep from rushing directly upon the newly-discovered Sioux braves, it seemed to him that the whole plaza was alive with the yelling, screeching, howling red-skins.

Bidding his steed run level, the rough-rider opened fire on those of his enemies brought upon a flank by that abrupt and unexpected change of course.

The range was rather long for revolver practice, even to one so nearly master of the weapon as Wheeler had already proven himself, but if nothing better, it served to keep the Indians from securing anything like an aim with their Winchesters.

Bullets hummed viciously past that swiftly-flying couple, but never one broke skin or hit on man or beast, and once more that taunting laugh floated backward as the daring scout found himself again in the lead, with all his enemies behind or upon the flanks.

Only a recklessly brave man would have thought of showing merriment under like circumstances, for fully a score well armed and mounted red-skins, one and all hungry for hair, were now in sight, all centering toward that white horse and its rider.

Possibly, too, Wheeler felt rather less gay than that laugh would indicate, for there was a troubled light in his dark eyes as they cast swift, comprehensive glances around, taking note of his enemies and their relative positions. But that trouble did not come through doubts of his own ultimate escape.

"If I only could—but I can't!" was passing through his busy brain. "If he caught that pony, he may win clear. If he didn't—well-wishing can't save him if he's fated to be lost, only—poor Linda!"

There lay the keenest sting of all! It would be sad enough to lose her father, but how much worse would it be for her to fall alive into the clutches of human devils like these yelping imps!

That terrible thought caused Wheeler to send Whirlygust ahead at a rate which forced yells of fierce envy and covetous longing from the lips of those savages, in whose eyes a perfect horse is the acme of their desires. Not one of those who witnessed that superb exhibition just then, but would have dared untold perils for the faintest chance of winning such a magnificent war-horse.

Plainly as though their thoughts had been expressed in words, White-horse Wheeler read the meaning of those cries, and instantly his mood changed. If he discouraged the savages too suddenly, might they not give over the chase as hopeless, and so turn back to make sure of an easier victim?

"Go easy, old boy!" he muttered, giving Whirlygust a pressure with his knees that brought about a gradual reduction of his speed. "Don't stall 'em off too mighty sudden, or we'll lose sport in the end. I know three or four of those copper imps who are just honing to cross over! And I'll give them free tickets, too, curse them, one and all!"

Not for himself was that curse. It was drawn forth by the fleeting vision of a fair young maiden lying helpless in those brawny arms—a maiden for whom this wild rider had conceived a sudden passion, as true and honest as it was fervent.

For five minutes longer White-horse Wheeler kept straight ahead, steadily gaining ground on his nearest pursuers, Whirlygust running well within his limit, yet appearing to be doing his utmost.

At the end of that period, all of the Indians were to the rear, but still strung out in a line long enough to guard against any turn or double

on the part of the fugitive, rendering it impossible for him to attempt a reunion with Anderson Filley, unless he should try to fairly shoot his way through that line.

At a signal from his master, Whirlygust appeared to stumble, plunging forward several yards with nose almost brushing the ground, then recovering, but with a plainly perceptible limp which drew a yell of fierce exultation from the lips of the chasing red-skins. Surely they must triumph now!

"In your minds, ye fools!" grimly chuckled Wheeler, casting a look over his shoulder, then plying his trail-ropes as though viciously flogging his laboring steed. "Swallowed the bait, have ye? Well, I'll give you a pill or two to counteract the dose, if you're not wider awake than that savors!"

Thinking more of the white steed than of its rider, and knowing that his claim would lie best whose hand or lasso first touched that magnificent creature, the Sioux held their fire, using heel and hand to urge their panting ponies forward in that mad chase.

Little by little some forged ahead, others falling back as their overtaken mounts proved unequal to the great strain, until less than a dozen of them all remained within rifle-shot of the white horse.

"If I only had my Winchester!" repeated Wheeler as he looked over a shoulder at his enemies, now strung out at unequal distances, save two alone; they seemed equally well-mounted, and each was straining every nerve to be first in at the death.

With a rifle in his hands, the rough-rider felt that he would be master of the situation, holding the heels of them all as he surely did.

"I could pick them off, one by one, and laugh at their efforts to even it up! I could clear them away, then turn back to see how poor Filley made out. If! Well, what's the matter with borrowing a rifle of one of yonder imps?"

More than once this bold fancy occurred to him, but never until now as more than a fancy. Yet, the longer he thought of it, the stronger grew his wish, and White-horse Wheeler began casting about for some plausible method of putting that wish into execution.

The chance was not long in offering itself, at least in imagination, and slightly veering to the left, he headed for a little clump of trees which lay something more than a mile in advance.

The Indians renewed their fierce yells at this shift, and still more viciously flogged their ponies. They evidently fancied the fugitive intended to take cover in his despair of shaking them off, and White-horse Wheeler fostered that idea right shrewdly.

"You're a limping cripple, poor Whirlygust!" he chuckled, swinging an end of his trail-rope so as to tap the intelligent beast on both knees. "Your bolt is mighty high shot, and I'm terribly afraid those yowling imps will soon be snarling over your—Steady, boy!"

Once more the trail-rope was swung violently, but the lashes never touched hair of the noble animal, who was limping heavily, yet covering ground at a truly marvelous rate, considering his apparent condition.

Only one thing gave Wheeler trouble: as they saw him making for cover, those of the savages who had dropped to the rear began to spread out as though to make sure he was driven to bay, without striking to right or left for a more favorable position.

"Surely the imps can't have snoked my trick!" he muttered, frowning darkly as he took note of their actions. "Well, if they don't spread out far enough to catch sight of me in time to warn their fellows, I'm not caring so mighty much!"

He gave Whirlygust the hint to put on a bit more steam, and as he drew near the timber—barely more than enough to lend cover to a horse and rider—he shot along the side of the cover, as though he had altered his mind about making a fight of it at that point.

He heard the yells of fierce rage which broke from the lips of his nearest pursuers at this change, and a grim, hard smile came into his face as he abruptly turned Whirlygust to the right, swinging fairly around the rear of the island, then coming to a trot as he faced to the rear.

His intention was to double on the two savages in the lead, dashing out upon them with his pistols when they came too close to escape his onset. He felt confident he could dispose of them both before they could get in a telling shot, and have ample time in which to secure a Winchester and cartridge-belt before any of the other red-skins could do him harm. After that, the rest seemed comparatively easy to one of his bold, self-reliant disposition.

It was a daring scheme, and by its very audacity it deserved to succeed, but scarcely had White-horse Wheeler turned to the rear, than he drew rein with a vicious ejaculation of disgusted disappointment.

A yell came from one of the more distant red-skins, who had veered far enough to the right to be able to catch sight of the fugitive as he turned to lie in wait, and knowing that his trick was foiled, Wheeler turned and dashed away once more in rapid flight.

As he swung fairly clear of the timber, Wheeler saw how wise he had been in accepting that distant warning. The two red-skins, instantly suspecting a trap of some sort, had swung sharply to the left, and were covered by the bodies of their ponies as they raced madly along.

As they caught sight of the pale-face in apparently unbroken flight, however, they rose erect and renewed their fierce efforts to win the glorious prize that hung temptingly in the balance.

"All right, you hounds!" grimly muttered Wheeler, making ready for another and still more reckless trick. "If one bait fails, try a better one! Now—see how this fits your gills, my jollies!"

Whirlygust suddenly seemed to stumble, pitching forward on his knees, then rolling over and over, as though cast by stepping in a burrow of some sort which had effectually crippled him.

And, shooting frog-like over the head of his horse, the pale-face struck the ground, rolling end for end, then lying on the broad of his back like one completely stunned!

So adroitly was the trick turned that not for a moment did the Indians suspect the truth. Yelling with fierce exultation, the two braves lashed their horses on, thinking only of claiming, not losing, a scalp.

On they thundered, until each one was preparing for a flying leap for the coveted trophy, and they were barely a score yards away when White-horse Wheeler suddenly rose to a sitting posture, each hand armed with a revolver, the guns speaking swift as surely!

Only the two shots. At such short range, and with such large targets, a miss was an impossibility in a master of the art of snap-shooting.

Two lives went out—lives long since justly forfeited by innumerable outrages—and snatching up Winchester and cartridge-belt, White-horse Wheeler gave a cry which brought Whirlygust to his feet, ready for yet another race or ruse, as the situation demanded.

Leaping into the saddle, White-horse Wheeler rode straight toward the demoralized savages who had witnessed that thrilling exploit, sending a bullet ahead of him by way of gentle warning.

Nothing more was really needed, for the Sioux were in poor condition for a battle at long bowls with such a master, and before half a dozen shots were fired, the enemy were in full flight.

Only himself to take thought for, Wheeler doubtless would have asked for nothing more enjoyable than to press the advantage he had won, knowing that he could choose his own distance at will. True, that savored something of cold-blooded murder, but did not these savages deserve all the punishment that could be meted out to them?

"A humanity shrieker" might have said not, but Wheeler was a Western man, who knew the Indians as they are, and felt that killing them was a deed to be proud of rather than ashamed.

"It'd be glorious sport, and I'd ask nothing better, only—her first!" decided Wheeler, turning aside from the chase, confident that the demoralized red-skins would not rally in time to give him further trouble. "It's too late and too far to lend Filley a hand, but—my little lady may be in danger from those painted hell-hounds!"

That thought was quite sufficient to urge him to speed, and even if Whirlygust had not shown himself fully willing to lend that steed, it is more than probable his love-lorn master would have shown him little mercy under existing circumstances.

Thoroughly acquainted with the lay of the country, White-horse Wheeler struck out toward the far-off hills, hoping to reach the Filley Ranch before any straggling Indians could chance upon it.

For the first few minutes, White-horse Wheeler kept a keen lookout in the direction his discomfited pursuers had taken, for there was a possibility of their rallying and once more starting after his scalp; but nothing occurred to strengthen that suspicion, and ere long he had lost sight of them entirely.

Nearly an hour more passed by without event worthy of note, but at the end of that period Wheeler drew rein sharply, for wild yells of mingled rage and fear and agony came to his startled ears!

CHAPTER XI.

TAKING ONE FROM TWO.

THOSE startling sounds came from some point almost directly ahead of White-horse Wheeler, although the fairly thick-growing timber through which he was making his way at the time, hindered him from at once ascertaining the cause.

"A white man for rocks!" was his instant conclusion, the muzzle of his captured Winchester swinging upward and to the front. "In trouble, too, or I'm a mighty poor judge of music!"

That unusual combination of rage, fear and

pain, offered a puzzle in itself, and a few moments were lost through an attempt on his part to reach a better solution of the enigma.

The cries were almost continuous, one instant sounding as though their luckless author was pleading for mercy, the next apparently in mortal agony of body or of mind, while through all ran an echo as of mad oaths and fierce curses.

"Wake up, Whirlygust, and let's see what sort of picnic it is we've run up against, anyway!" quickly decided the rough-rider, holding his rifle ready for instant use as his good steed rapidly but quietly advanced toward the spot from whence came that odd alarm.

It was barely possible that his first suspicion of a cunning trap being spread for his worsting was correct, though Wheeler had about rejected that natural idea, and this precaution was simply born of common sense. Trouble there surely must be, and White-horse Wheeler had no notion of making himself the prime sufferer.

Letting the stallion pick its own course, the scout devoted his entire attention to the ground in advance, his keen eyes roving over every point for the first glimpse of an enemy, and he won it, too!

The dark woods began to brighten a bit, and knowing that they must be coming to an opening of some sort, Wheeler gave Whirlygust the sign to halt, just before they reached the edge of a natural glade set down in the forest.

The opening was by no means an extensive one, although it afforded ample space for the border drama just about to be enacted. The ground was level, free from trees, covered with a sparse growth of coarse grass.

"The devil!" ejaculated White-horse Wheeler, as he caught a fairer glance at what was going on in that little glade. "Two devils, rather!"

Two brawny Sioux braves were seated upon their ponies, their whole attention devoted to a third person, whom they were bent on putting to a novel torture. That person, from whose lips issued threats and prayers and curses, all in a crazy jumble, was surely of white descent, but only his words and his garb could be accepted as proof, just then.

The noose of one lasso was tightly closed about his ankles, while that of another encircled his arms at the elbows. The other ends were fastened in the customary manner to the ponies, and with ugly laughter at the sport to come, the Indians were preparing to ride in opposite directions, to test their mustangs in a pulling-match!

All of this White-horse Wheeler took in at a single glance, and in that sight he felt yet another spur to his fierce hatred toward all of the red-skin race. He lifted his rifle until the silver bead drew clearly against the ribs of the further red-skin, and the slightest imaginable increase of pressure on the trigger would have sounded the death-note; but that pressure was lacking!

"If I drop the riders, what will the ponies do? Jerk daylights out of the poor fellow, before I could drop the lot of 'em!"

The red-skins were busied with their lassoes, slowly paying them out and lengthening their line of three links diagonally across the front, as represented by Wheeler and Whirlygust. The furthest red-skin was considerably less than a hundred yards away, and Wheeler knew that his aim was good for the head of a squirrel that far, so that it was not a dread of missing his mark that held back his fire.

He knew that he could shoot down both of the Sioux before they could either flee far, or draw a gun to return his fire; but while this was being done, what would be the fate of yonder helpless wretch? Hampered as he was, even a single contrary leap of the ponies might kill or cripple their captive.

It was a difficult situation, and matters were not bettered any by the lack of time in which to study out the proper solution; even now, one of the copper-skinned imps was flinging up a hand with a cry that told his comrade to begin their barbarous sport!

"All right, and luck has it!" decided White-horse Wheeler, his Winchester rising to cover the further Sioux.

A horrible screech of death-agony blended with that spiteful report, and shifting his aim with marvelous rapidity, the revenue scout sent a second bullet crashing through the brain of the mustang, giving a ringing cheer as he caught a glimpse of man and beast both going down in a heap together.

That same cheer sent Whirlygust forth from cover, charging direct upon the second Sioux, who, tried and trained in wild life, had instantly caught at his gun, dropping the lasso, and causing his pony to leap ahead and to one side at the same time.

White-horse Wheeler saw the rising rifle, but he made no attempt to duck or to dodge, riding straight for the red-skin, fast as noble Whirlygust could carry him, throwing out the empty shell and driving another cartridge into the firing-chamber as he came.

Reckless of life when in battle-heat, his main care was for the hapless wretch whose wild cries had caught his attention, and in hopes of

causing the second savage to wheel and dash back toward his fallen mate, when he knew he could surely get in a fatal shot before the deadly "pluck" would come, the scout rushed forward as described.

He saw the puff of smoke come from the Indian's Winchester, and he felt as though a point of fire had been lashed across his cheek. He knew that a bullet had struck him, but there was no time for asking how little or how much he had been hurt, for another onward bound of the mustang would surely do harm to yonder helpless captive.

"Man to dog, and you're the yelper, buck!" he cried, with fierce recklessness, even then holding his fire, freeing his right hand for a grasp at his enemy, or at his pony, whichever might seem advisable.

With a defiant whoop the savage swayed to one side, giving his mustang guidance thus, while he flung out the empty cartridge-case and snapped a fresh shell into the vacant chamber.

White-horse Wheeler whirled his own rifle around, barrel striking barrel just as hammer fell, and the discharge seemed severe enough to twist both weapons from their owners' hands. And then the shock came, Whirlygust striking the slighter mustang, while Wheeler grappled with the savage, tearing him from the skin-covered saddle-tree, hurling him headlong to the ground.

Swift as thought, and before the pony could start away, Wheeler caught the hair-bedecked reins with his left hand, bringing both animals to a halt, his right hand jerking forth a revolver and instantly putting it to the best possible use.

None too soon, either, for the hardy buck was grasping a weapon as he rolled over, seemingly unharmed by the fall which would have killed almost any white man.

Only the one shot; then White-horse Wheeler could give his undivided attention to conquering the Indian pony.

That was not such an easy task. Like all such, trained to both hate and fear the white man, the mustang tried to break away, snapping its gleaming teeth in vicious lunges at that controlling arm, squealing like a crazy beast the while.

Still thinking of the captive white, Wheeler whipped forth his knife and drew it across the lasso, now drawn taut by that plunging brute. But with that care off his mind, it was only the work of a few moments for the cool and dextrous scout to gain the mastery.

Leaving Whirlygust to care for himself, White-horse Wheeler rushed the mustang across to the nearest tree, to which he quickly had him tied, leaving the unruly brute with a muttered word or two:

"Stay put, you wormy brute! Butt your fool skull empty, if ye like, though I may have a better use for you than that; unless yonder poor devil has croaked!"

Only pausing long enough to sweep a glance around, lest other red-skins had been within hearing of those shots, and were rushing to take a hand in the game, White-horse Wheeler recovered his repeater, then sprung across to where the being on whose behalf he had incurred so great a risk was lying.

He was by no means certain that his efforts had been wholly successful, for he knew that one or two severe jerks had been given the poor fellow, despite all his care to the contrary, and after the sample of lusty lungs he had so recently offered, he must be pretty seriously hurt to lie so still and so silent.

Ragged, and dirty, and stained with blood, the rescued man certainly presented anything but an agreeable sight just then, but White-horse Wheeler was not over-critical at such times, and hurriedly loosened and cast off the two ropes, as the first practical move.

"Rouse up, Johnny!" he cried, briskly, dropping to his knees by the side of the late captive. "You're not nearly so dead as you think, if you'd only quit thinking that way! Rouse up, and—Good enough!"

With a painful catching of his breath, the fellow gave a stir, his closed lids parting for a moment. A husky rattle sounded in his throat, and then, as his hands and feet began to squirm, so the broken flood of oddly-blended curses and prayers started afresh.

White-horse Wheeler burst into a grim laugh, his worst fears set aside by that outburst, and as the fellow fairly opened his eyes, his strong hands gave him a jerk that lifted his person to a sitting posture.

"Wake up, Johnny Lost! Didn't I tell you you wasn't nigh a creaker, yet? Why, man, dear, you're fit to preach a brimstone sermon in—"

"Whar—which—what—"

"Why, when, whither, and what for?" cheerily interposed the revenue scout. "If not, why not? Come, man, dear, get a brace on you, and prepare to do your share in receiving the company which may come howling in upon us at any moment."

"You don't—then I hain't—them p'izen im—didn't yank the daylight clean out o' me!" huskily mumbled the bewildered fellow, one

dingy hand unsteadily brushing across his face, as though to clear his still dingier eyesight.

Although he had as yet examined the man's person only with his eyes, White-horse Wheeler felt tolerably certain no serious injury had been received by this stranger, and, with his fears on that point set at rest, he had time to consider other matters.

From what he had witnessed that afternoon, it was certain that an unusual number of red-skins were in that section, and from tidings which had come his way of late, he had little difficulty in hitting the truth of the matter; Sitting Bull was fleeing for the Canada line with his Sioux, and these braves were a straggling portion, plundering as they fled.

It might be that no others were in that immediate vicinity, but, on the contrary, there might be enough within ear-range of those shots to render further delay in that quarter equivalent to death.

"Don't be a fool, man!" he said, impatiently, turning toward the fellow after taking a keen, sweeping look around them. "You're able to sit a pony? If you had to, I mean? You're not so badly hurt that you couldn't run away from another pack of red-skins?"

"They hain't—good Lawd!" spluttered the fellow, scrambling to his feet, smartly enough, though he staggered for a bit before he could fairly manage his legs.

That action flung the shaggy hair away from his face, and White-horse Wheeler caught a squarer look into his face than he had as yet done. He gave a barely perceptible start, and a curious light shot into his black eyes. That glitter betokened recognition, but for the moment he gave no further sign to that effect.

"Come over to cover, old man," he said, crisply, a hand closing on the other's arm and urging him toward the tree to which the Indian pony had been tethered shortly before. "I didn't say there are any more red-skins coming, but it's just as well to catch the first glimpse, if they should turn up. And so—what did you say your name was?"

"Ounce—Peleg Ounce, boss! And ef ever mortal critter was thankful to 'nother fer—eh?"

"How's smuggling, nowadays, old boy?" coolly asked White-horse Wheeler, a peculiar smile coming into his strong face.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DESERTED RANCH.

An indescribable sound rose to the lips of the ragged fellow, and he shrunk back as far as that firm grip would admit, his dirty visage turning perceptibly paler, even by that fading light.

"I don't—smugglin'—" he gasped, huskily, giving a sudden twist with his arm as though longing to break away in headlong flight.

"Never even heard of such a thing before, did you, Peleg?" mocked the revenue scout, easily maintaining his grip. "Well, what're you in such a mortal sweat for, then, good Peleg?"

"I never—Good Lawd!"

"Who said you did? Can't a fellow ask a simple question concerning the main industry of a country, without sending the person he questions into a conniption fit, Peleg?"

Ounce drew a long breath, but it was not exactly one of relief. He had received a shock, but he was not utterly devoid of shrewdness, and had sense enough to lock his lips until he could rally his wits in a degree.

White-horse Wheeler gave a little chirp which brought Whirlygust to his side, ready for whatever duty came next. Wheeler unhitched the mustang from the tree, holding its head firmly while bidding Peleg Ounce mount the creature.

"You hain't ought to regret leaving this spot, pardner," he said, lightly, "and I'll feel my thatch heap sight safer when I've put a few miles behind me. So—up you go, Peleg!"

Without a word Ounce scrambled into the Indian saddle, and when he was fairly seated therein, Wheeler released the pony, leaping upon his own good steed, ready for what might come next.

"Don't run away, or get run away with, I beg of you, Peleg!" he called out, as the mustang tried to unsaddle its new rider. "I never could be dead sure of my aim in the dusk, and I might hit you in place of that brute, if I had to shoot!"

"I won't—Dug-gun ye fer a p'izen critter!" panted Ounce, as he fought with the contrary brute.

But Ounce proved himself a more than ordinarily good rider, and after trying a few ugly tricks, the mustang submitted to the reins, and White-horse Wheeler led the way from the death-glade, neither man speaking a word until several miles were placed behind them.

Then the tract of timber was fairly cleared, and seeing nothing on the open stretch ahead to suggest danger, White-horse Wheeler turned upon his companion, speaking coolly, but firmly:

Now, my dear Peleg, about that smuggling: you say you don't know anything about it?"

"What smuggling, boss?"

"Smuggling in general, Peleg, for the present. Were you working for the chief, or just taking a trip on your own account, when those red-skins nabbed you, back yonder?"

"Fore the good Lawd, boss, I never—Shorely you don't reckon I'm one o' them p'izen critters, sir?"

"Then there really are p'izen critters, alias smugglers, in these parts, Peleg?"

"Fer I was jest out on the loose, like, boss; jest moseyin' sorter keerless over town-ways, thinkin' mebbe I'd be able fer to strike a job fer the fall lumberin', ef nothin' better, when them p'izen imps hed me in two ropes, so mighty quick I never knowed how come I so!"

"And your pack of smuggled goods, Peleg?"

"So help me, boss, I never hed no pack o' nothin'! An' ef you hedn't come up jest as you did—Boss, ef ever I fergit yer fer doin' that, hope I may rot on my two hoofs!"

Whatever might be said concerning his first denial, there could be no doubt as to Peleg Ounce's thorough earnestness in this expression of gratitude. He leaned over in the saddle, catching the hand nearest him, pressing it to his feverish lips, then resting it for an instant on the crown of his hatless head.

That action was not without a certain rude grace of its own, and he to whom that mute allegiance was vowed, did not entirely escape its influence. Still, White-horse Wheeler was not in a sentimental mood, just then, and withdrawing his hand, he dryly spoke:

"Stick to your knitting, Peleg, old boy! I know you and your past record a great deal better than you give me credit for, perhaps. I know that you can tell me not a little concerning this smuggling scheme, if you only see fit to do so, and while I hardly like to presume on a favor bestowed, business is business, you understand?"

"Kin I tell what I don't know, boss?" uneasily muttered Ounce, as they resumed their advance across the open ground. "Surely you don't want me to stuff ye with lies?"

"That's precisely what I'm objecting to, Peleg," came the cool retort. "Stuff me with honest facts, and I'll take all you can offer, but I'm drawing the line at lies. Now—as the man who saved you from being torn limb from limb by those red imps, I ask you again: how goes the smuggling in this section, old boy?"

For a brief space there was silence, during which the two men rode along at a fair gait, White-horse Wheeler patiently waiting for his answer. It came, at last.

"Ef I tell what I know, or guess at, boss, you'll hold me cl'ar?"

"Not only that, Peleg, but I'll see that you are well paid for all the information you give, when its full value is made known. Isn't that a fair and a square offer?"

"It's white—like the gentleman as makes it, sir," said Ounce, seriously enough, so far as the Revenue Scout could judge from his tones alone; already it was too dusky for close gazing. "An' fer the fust offer, I'll say this: Ef you hain't tired o' livin', boss, better turn up this job you're on, an' hunt safer quarters!"

"In still plainer words, you think I'm—just what, Peleg?"

"Mebbe I wouldn't feel nigh so sure, boss, only fer the critter you're ridin', but that—Waal, hain't you the man they call White-horse Wheeler?"

"And what sort of animal may that be, Peleg?"

"A rev'nue spy, boss, ef ye want me to spit it right out."

"A revenue spy, is it? And how did you learn about him, Peleg, unless you are playing cahoots with the smugglers up here? If lying comes easiest, old man, just go slow enough to let the truth catch up!"

"You done saved me from the awfulest death mortal critter ever hed measured out to him, sir," came the earnest response, "an' ef I can't tell you the clean truth, I'll jest button up, tight! An' so—I hain't never done no smugglin', sir, but I've knowed thar was sech truck gwine on in these parts. I'm not sayin' as how I could putt my thumb right flat on top o' any o' them as hev tuck part in them sort o' doins, nuther; but I will say this much: Word hes come up lyar that the Rev'nue tective knowed as White-Hoss Wheeler hed tuck the job o' huntin' out the gang. Word hes come that you—that he is some's in this neighborhood a'ready. And so—Waal, boss, I've ketcht odd-come-stray hints that ef sech a man did come hyar, he'd ketch his last sickness in a holy hurry!"

Peleg Ounce rattled off this long speech like one who fears interruption before he can have his say out, but White-Horse Wheeler listened placidly, so far as outward seeming went.

Inwardly, though, he was far from being at ease, for he knew that his task would be doubled in difficulty now that a hint as to his mission had leaked out. As for the increased peril, that did not cause him a single quail.

"Supposing I tell you I'm not this White-horse Wheeler, Peleg?"

"I'll be mighty glad of it—on your 'count, boss," came the quick response. "Him or not him, I owe you my life, an' that's all I've got to keer fer. You acted clean white, an' I'll do my level best to pay ye back in the same cyne, ef ever the chaine turns up, boss!"

"Even if I should turn out to be this revenue guy?"

"Even if you was to turn out the devil his own self, sir!"

"That's hearty, at any rate," with a short laugh, then adding: "All right, Peleg, and I'll put you to the test without delay. My name is Edgar Winston. I'm interested in the welfare of a family called Filley, who have a ranch not far from here, and—"

"I know 'em, boss!"

"You are to be congratulated, Peleg! To know that family is a liberal education in itself! Now—I'm going to the Filley Ranch, to make sure no harm comes to that family, through those rascally Sioux. It may be that we'll run onto a fight before the end comes, but you're not afraid to hold your end level, Peleg?"

"I'll stick to you, boss, ontel you give me the shake."

"Good enough! Talk sufficient for the present, Peleg; now, it's legs, do your duty!"

Throughout all this talk, which had been broken by frequent pauses which did not call for space in print, the two strangely-met companions had been pressing onward at a rapid pace, and when White-horse Wheeler finally "rung off," they were at a point barely a league distant from the Filley Ranch.

Ever since parting from Anderson Filley after that hastily-uttered greeting, Wheeler had been more or less seriously troubled on his account.

True, he had done all that lay in his power to aid the rancher, and far more than any ordinary mortal could or would have risked; but that fact did not lighten his mental burden. Loving Linda Filley as he did, though under an assumed name and character, thanks to his dangerous mission in that region, Wheeler naturally wished all good to her relatives. But, despite his efforts to believe in the escape of the rancher, he was not able to do so, and when they came into sight of the building its complete darkness gave him a fresh thrill of uneasiness.

Had Anderson Filley indeed escaped, reaching home in safety, only to abandon it in company with his family?

"God grant it may be that!" mentally prayed the revenue scout, as he moved forward, finally drawing rein and leaving the two horses under cover before advancing further.

"Mighty airy fer 'em to bunk in, don't ye reckon, boss?" ventured Peleg, in low, husky tones that betrayed a certain degree of uneasiness.

"Quiet! Follow, but step like you were among sleeping rattlers!"

Not until he had completely encircled the house and its outbuildings, did Wheeler venture up to the door. His rap sounded hollowly, and it was with a heavy heart in his bosom that he tried the knob, to feel the lock answer his touch, the door swinging silently open.

Beyond a doubt the family had departed; but how, and whither?

Surely the red-skins had not paid a call? Pursued by soldiery as they were, surely they could never have resisted the temptation to complete their dastardly work by applying the torch?

If other lives had been interested, perhaps White-horse Wheeler would have acted and reasoned differently, but even a detective is no more than a man, while deeply in love, be it remembered.

Closing the door when Peleg Ounce had fairly crossed the darkened threshold, White-horse Wheeler struck a match for the purpose of making an inspection of the building, to satisfy his hope, or confirm his fears.

By that flickering flame he saw an oil lamp standing on the table in the center of the room, and touching the wick, he quickly had light enough to answer all purposes.

Almost his first sweeping glance gave him joy, for, while the room bore a disordered appearance, there was nothing of the ruthless destruction which surely would follow a visit from red-skins.

"Filley got back, and they've fled to safer quarters!" he said, with a long breath of intense relief.

That belief did not prevent his making a more thorough examination of the lower floor (the house was a story-and-a-half high), however, with the natural idea that, leaving in such haste, his friends might have overlooked some valuables which he might be the means of saving to them, in case of the worst.

Like some lately-beaten hound, meek and downcast, Peleg Ounce stood awaiting the pleasure of the man who had saved his life that day. He showed little interest in the search, however, and it was his keen ears which caught the first alarming sound from without that building.

There came the approaching clatter of hoof-strokes, and Peleg cried out in husky, tremulous warning:

"Injuns, boss! They're comin' byar! We're ketched in a death-trap!"

CHAPTER XIII.

GRIM DEATH AT THE DOOR.

WITHOUT the slightest premonitory warning came that grisly apparition, and it was not until the gaunt and hungry-looking mountain lion showed its gleaming fangs in a menacing snarl that Anderson Filley fairly realized the nature of the horrible trap he had fallen into.

For a single breath he was almost paralyzed, staring at the crouching beast with dazed eyes, and it was only instinct that had caused his armed right hand to rise on guard.

Whether the work of an overstrained fancy or not, the rancher heard a low, mocking chuckle, as though his merciless enemy was watching for his death beneath those great paws and hungry fangs.

A curse went out against Colonel Cougar, and instantly every nerve and every instinct was brought into play, not so much to save his own life, as to foil the fiendish hopes of his ruthless captor.

With dagger ready to strike, Anderson Filley slowly, silently moved back toward the side wall, keeping his face turned toward the lion as that huge cat treacherously shifted position, trying to win a station from whence it might spring upon his back.

"If 'twas only the two-legged cougar!"

Over and over again that fierce wish flashed through the brain of the imprisoned rancher, and each time it came, the thought seemed to lend him another degree of strength and courage.

He began to regard the lion as the representative of Colonel Cougar, and to feel that as he fared in this contest, just so would he come off when human beast took the place now filled by four-footed animal.

In such moments the brain works with marvelous rapidity, and while he was slowly shifting his position from the center of that cell to one of its stone walls, Anderson Filley had time to recall more than one grim, even weird rumor concerning the morbid fancy Colonel Darke Cruger had shown for wild beasts of the cat species.

Vague hints as to imprisoned brutes which, when driven doubly ferocious by starvation and tortures, were turned loose upon each other, to fight and wrestle until death came in as a double victor.

Up to now he had given those ugly rumors barely a passing thought, but one and all came back to his busy brain as he stood facing that purring, snarling, grinning cat.

Through it all Anderson Filley kept watching his ugly antagonist, dagger ready to receive its body when the leap should come, his dull marvel being that it had been delayed even so long.

Possibly it was that glittering piece of steel, the like of which may have been felt by the lion before his capture; or there may have been a magnetic influence felt through the gray-blue eyes which so steadily kept watch upon its own; but, for some reason or other, the lion delayed its leap, slowly, almost imperceptibly edging around the cell, close to the wall, but with grinning muzzle ever pointed toward its longed-for victim.

Anderson Filley imitated this movement, so far as keeping the same relative distance between them was concerned, his left hand behind him and touching the cold stones, to guard against the slightest slip or unsteadiness on his own part, for he knew how surely that would invite an attack, which could hardly end save in his own death beneath those massive paws, those long, hungry teeth.

Thus it came about that, almost without realizing the passage of time or of space, Anderson Filley felt his fingers slip from the smooth stones to emptiness, for he had edged his way around the cell until his back was brought in line with the opening through which the lion had leaped, a few moments before.

A curious thrill shot over him as he realized this much; and with that thrill came a wild, fantastic fancy, so vivid that it seemed as though a picture was painted upon his very eyeballs.

What if the lion should make its leap at that instant; what if he could drop to the floor, or leap aside at the precise moment; would not the beast shoot through that opening, into the den from whence it had so unexpectedly sprung?

Truly it was a wild, weird fancy, but for a single breath of time it was entertained as not only possible, but practicable, by the overstrained brain of the doomed rancher.

If the huge cat had made its leap just then, beyond doubt Filley would have done his part toward accomplishing that odd transformation, but the lion lay motionless, save for its squirming tail-tip. Hungry though it doubtless was, not yet could it muster pluck for a death-leap upon the desperate being who so boldly faced it there.

That impossible hope quickly gave place to another, far more reasonable, and the rancher was once more a man, eager to save his own life.

With the hand behind his back, he measured the height of that opening. It was rather

higher than he liked, but he believed he could surmount that difficulty with the others.

Shifting his unarmed hand until his fingers closed on the edge of that heavy door, all the while holding the lion in check with his keen and steady gaze, Anderson Filley gave a leap which doubled legs and body together, and at the same time sent him backward through that opening, his left hand swinging the heavy door shut at the same time.

It was an awkward thing to perform, with so much at stake. A single miscalculation would surely prove fatal, for the lion would be upon him before he could recover sufficiently to meet that assault.

The lion *did* leap, but too late to catch the rancher, too late to do better than slam the door shut and bruise its widely-opened jaws against that tough barrier!

Anderson Filley fell heavily on what appeared to be another stone floor, similar to that of the cell which he had just deserted, but he was battling for dear life, now, and instantly regained his footing.

He heard the snarling brute recoil from its baffled leap, and saw the door swing open an inch or two.

"He'll claw it open! How can I—"

Memory answered, even before that question could fairly shape itself, and Filley jerked a piece of stout cord from the pocket in which it had been passed over as useless while he was searching his garments for something by which he might pick that strong lock.

Doubling the cord, he passed it over the projecting bolt, pulling the door shut, just in time to once more cheat the eager claws of the lion.

The solid wall seemed to shake before the might of its leap, and as its sharp claws rattled and scratched against the oaken door, the blood of the rancher turned chill, and he grew faint at heart with thought of the horrible fate which he had so narrowly escaped for the time being.

Still, he was not so utterly unmanned as to relax his grip on the doubled cord, and those claws rattled away without doing him any ill. And, as he heard the muffled snarling of the baffled beast, Anderson Filley rallied from that brief faintness.

"Cheated, ye devil!" he huskily cried, his thoughts dealing with master rather than with beast for the moment.

The lion heard him, and redoubled its efforts to force a way in, claws rattling, teeth scraping against wood and iron with a fierce vigor that told how scant a show the rancher would stand for his life if ever they again stood face to face, with no barrier between.

But the door defied teeth and toe-nails. It was sunken flush with the stones, and fitted too carefully to offer hold for even a claw, so long as Filley could maintain his grip, or the cord itself was not cut or worn in two.

That was the next dread which assailed the rancher, and as he heard the cougar at work with teeth and claws, he tried to recall just how far the string must be exposed.

Now that the door was entirely closed, he found himself in utter darkness. Not a ray of light could enter around that door, and the den into which he had blindly cast himself, was entirely without illumination from any source.

"His panther pit!" reflected Filley, as he gave that fruitless cast with his eyes, remembering the surmises he had made while trying to open that barrier.

Surely Colonel Cougar had not turned the lion loose to stand guard over smuggled goods? Then this pit could not be the store-house his imagination had pictured while the entrance was barred to him.

As though disgusted with repeated failure, the cougar ceased tearing at the door, growling and snarling as it beat a retreat for the time being. And as the keen sense of hearing with which he was gifted told Anderson Filley as much, he resolved to learn something more about the quarters fate had cast him into.

Winding the slack of the cord around his left hand and wrist, which enabled him to use his forearm as a brace, thus resting his cramped fingers, Filley took the dagger between his teeth, thus setting his right hand at liberty.

Feeling in his pocket for a match, he drew it smartly along one lifted thigh, then held the tiny torch above his head while he peered with anxious curiosity through the slowly scattering gloom.

It was only a feeble substitute for a torch, but it gave light sufficient to assure him that he was the sole occupant of that den: for den it surely was, as the foul, fetid odor had long since convinced his nostrils.

When the match burned down to his thumb and finger, the rancher did not renew the light, for his store of matches was small, and he could not tell how precious they might become ere the end of that adventure.

Still, he had seen enough to convince him that he had no fresh enemy of the cat kind to dread, unless another door should be opened by other than himself.

"Now, what next?"

It was easy enough to put that question, but

how could he answer it? And yet, what could he do save wait?

"Until that bigger devil comes to help his brother brute!"

The bitter reflection passed through Filley's brain, and for a little he was strongly tempted to tear away that retaining string, and kill or be slain, rather than gratify his enemy by prolonging his vain struggle.

But as the cougar returned again to its attack on the door, the rancher tightened his grip on the cord. It was easier to think of casting to the winds all hope of escape, than it was to act on such a reckless impulse.

Once more the huge cat retreated, snarling viciously over the repeated failures, or, possibly, through a growing uneasiness at finding itself shut out from the den to which it must have grown habituated.

That idea occurred to the imprisoned man, and he caught himself vaguely wondering how the beast would act in case the string should suddenly give way. Would the lion enter its den at a swift leap, or would it be suspicious of a snare, after what had occurred?

If he could only guess what course Colonel Cougar would prefer to see him follow, how easy it would be for him to decide!

"I'd go against him, if it killed me! Curses cover the devil from crown to sole! He shut me in there, just to— Or, did he?"

Again doubts assailed the rancher.

If Colonel Cougar had plotted his death by means of that lion, why had he left the connecting door unbarred? Or, if that was too risky, through fear of the cat's showing itself too soon, why had he not left something by means of which the door might be opened, lying carelessly by, to be discovered by his victim?

"He never meant me to escape with life, curse him!" concluded Filley, hot rage almost suffocating him. "But—he never meant me to be eaten by his brother brute—so soon! He counted on weakening me down, first!"

As he recalled some of the questions asked him by Colonel Cougar before the springing of that trap, Filley gradually grew convinced that this was nearer the truth than were his first surmises. And, if only to foil those hopes, once more he was tempted to relax his grasp on the cord by which alone that barrier was secured, and kill or be slain!

"How would he come? Headlong, too swift for a fair stroke, or would he give him time? If I only knew that!"

And yet, what other chance for life had he? He could not retain his advantage forever; fatigue, hunger, thirst, all would surely if slowly weaken his powers, and then—

Yielding to fierce impulse, Anderson Filley dropped the cord, permitting the door to swing open almost an inch.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN HOUR OF AGONY.

THE rancher caught his breath sharply as that tiny streak of dim light around three sides of the iron-bound door became visible to his aching eyes, yet he made no effort to resume the advantage he had so rashly cast from him.

"It's death this way, after miserable torture! Better end it all, for good or for ill!" he mentally decided, gripping the dagger firmly and pressing close to one side of the door.

When Filley released his grip on the cord he could hear the lion snarling uneasily in the other cell, but now all was still as death, and that fact assured him the beast had noticed the slight movement of the door.

And so, feeling sure that the crisis could not be delayed very long, he almost held his breath with the suspense of waiting for the end.

Not a sound gave him warning of the cat's approach, intently though he was listening, and, despite his steeled nerves, Filley gave a little start as he saw the door swing shut, blotting out the light.

The clawing sound which instantly followed told him the lion was making its investigation, and with dagger uplifted and muscles strained he stood ready to do his part as best he might.

That cautious paw drew back, and the door instantly moved ajar as before. And then, deftly as any human finger, a claw was inserted in the crack, and the door was drawn back until it swung clear, letting in a broadening square of clear light.

From his position, pressing close against the partition wall, the rancher could not catch so much as a glimpse of the lion, and a cold thrill of fear crept over his person.

He felt almost certain the cat was crouching for a leap which would carry it through the opening from one cell to the other so swiftly that he could only strike at random.

If so, there could be but one ending: a death-grapple with a wounded beast far more powerful than the most muscular of mankind—and that would just as certainly mean death to the human being.

Just as he was on the point of yielding to temptation and making a movement to hasten that ordeal, two paws fell lightly upon the stone partition, and a grim muzzle silently crept into view, lips drawn back and teeth bared, nostrils

sniffing suspiciously as they tried to locate the man.

Now Anderson Filley *did* hold his breath, for he could see that it was too soon to risk the stroke on which his very life depended. Keen though the point of his dagger was, he could not feel sure of driving it through that domed skull without the weapon glancing, to inflict nothing more than an infuriating wound.

Little by little the mountain lion moved its head further inside the opening, its snarl changing to a puzzled, purring sound, until—

Throwing all the force of his good right arm into the effort, Anderson Filley struck, sending the keen-pointed blade to the very hilt exactly at the joining of neck and skull!

With a broken howl the cougar jerked back, wrenching the dagger from the rancher's hand, and, quick as thought Filley reached out, to catch the string which still hung across the bolt, meaning to jerk the door shut, thus gaining a reprieve in case the lion should only be wounded.

But his haste foiled his hopes. His hand caught only one doubled end, and the string came free, without moving the heavy door.

He saw the lion writhing on the stone floor, bleeding freely from mouth and nostrils, but seemingly far from dying. And, with a desperate courage, the prisoner leaped through the aperture, flinging himself upon that hairy mass, gripping throat with both hands.

He counted on a terrible struggle for life, but not so: the cougar writhed and shivered, giving him several random rakes with his claws, but that was all.

The good blade had done its work well, and as he felt those muscles go weak and flaccid in his grip, Anderson Filley relaxed his fingers, drawing back, faint and dizzy with the strong reaction.

More than one minute passed by before he could rally sufficiently to take note of his surroundings, and even then he would hardly have been strong enough to pluck the dagger from that bleeding wound, only he feared Colonel Cougar might put in an appearance, to catch him wholly unarmed and at his mercy.

"Never that!" he panted, as he tugged at the dagger-haft until the blade came away from its still quivering sheath of flesh and bones. "I've killed one cougar—I'm good for another and a worse, curse ye, Satan's Own!"

He shook the bloody blade toward the ceiling, through an opening in which he fully expected to catch sight of that mocking visage; but nothing of the sort greeted his eyes, and as the moments passed on without his seeing or hearing aught of Colonel Cougar, Anderson Filley gradually recovered his powers, both mentally and bodily.

Now that the mountain lion was slain, and his life no longer in actual peril, his wits grew clearer, and he could more fairly judge the situation in which he found himself.

Colonel Cougar had only sprung that trap beneath him, to save life, either his own, or that of the rancher whom he was trying to bring to his terms. He surely had no reason to suppose that Filley could open that carefully locked door, and most certainly the lion could do him no harm as long as that strong bolt was shot.

"He'll come back, in time, hoping to scare me into terms," the prisoner reasoned, further. "Maybe he'll be counting on this cat to break down my will! Then—can't I trick him, instead?"

It was a wild, grim ruse that flashed into the busy brain of the rancher, but he could think of no better scheme, and fearing lest Colonel Cougar might put in an appearance before he could perfect his arrangements, he fell to work without further delay for thought or for reasoning.

Snatching the oil-lamp from its rude bracket, Filley passed into the lion's den, sweeping the walls with eager gaze, but all that he saw more than the flickering match had revealed, was a narrow door set in the stone wall opposite that through which the cougar had leaped.

This door reached to the floor, and was likewise of oak, banded and studded with iron. There was no lock or keyhole visible from that side, and after exerting his powers to the utmost without even shaking, much less forcing the barrier wide, Filley gave over, with a curse of angry disappointment.

The ceiling was far too high for him to reach, and there was nothing on which he could stand, save the sill of the partition door. He lifted himself up on that, but gave another despairing groan as he found only smooth-cut stone in that direction.

Without powerful tools, he could not hope to force his way out of either roof or side-walls, and lacking those, he could only fall back upon the grim trick which had been earliest to reach his troubled brain.

He passed back to the other cell, and replaced the lamp in the socket prepared for it. He caught at the carcass of the lion, dragging it across the stone flooring to a corner furthest from where the trap opened above, then lay down between the body and the wall.

He could not hope to conceal his person entirely, and made no such attempt. His hope lay in

causing Colonel Cougar to jump to the conclusion that both man and beast had died fighting.

"If I can scare him into coming down! If I can only fetch him within arm's-length of this!" he muttered, giving the blood-dimmed dagger a savage flourish. "I'll ask nothing better of fortune!"

And he meant it, too, just then, though longer reflection might modify his hopes, his longings.

As he lay there, his garments torn and covered with blood from his impetuous grapple with the dying cougar, his armed hand hidden by lying between his breast and the lion, Anderson Filley looked dead enough in all conscience, and a tableau better calculated to deceive one taking a downward glance from that trap-door, could hardly have been arranged.

But the rancher was very much alive, for all that! Never before in his memory had his brain been so active, his reflections so swift.

All that had occurred that eventful day came flocking across his mind, and even complete sentences, just as spoken by Colonel Darke Cruger, seemed to ring in his ears.

Particularly those concerning Linda—his loving, innocent, pure and pretty little daughter!

It was nothing new, this passion of Colonel Cougar for the girl, for long since Anderson Filley had divined as much, although the villain had never until that day openly avowed his wish to make Linda his wife.

It was that growing suspicion which caused Filley, quite as much as through any great love for the law, to cautiously collect strong proofs of criminal deeds on the part of the colonel and his associates, which he was ridding to post when turned back by Sitting Bull's raiding red-skins.

How could his mission have been suspected? He had been so guarded in his actions, so cautious in covering his tracks; only letting Maurice into the dangerous secret, and that but a day or two before this disastrous one. Yet, suspected it must have been, or he would never have been so closely watched as to have his discarding of that paper noted.

Then, too, all that had taken place since he was rescued from the Indians by Cougar and his men, went to prove that his capture was their whole purpose in taking that ride in company.

"For me, I wouldn't care a rap!" mentally groaned the rancher, his eyes closed, his face showing ghastly pale in contrast with the bloody marks upon it, as he awaited the result of his ruse. "I'm a man. I'm old enough to die, if it must end that way. But—my girl! my boy! my poor wife!"

A groan of mental torture burst from his lips as he thought of his loved ones, helpless at the mercy of that demon; for man Colonel Cougar surely was not!

Far worse than any ordinary death did Anderson Filley suffer as he lay motionless through those slowly-crawling, leaden minutes of time.

Even if Maurice had cheated the yelping red-skins whom he saw pressing hotly along his trail that day, how could he guard his mother and sister against that heartless villain, backed up as he would be by all of his evil associates?

"He swore to make her his wife! My girl—my poor, sunny-haired little baby! God of pity, send him to me—send him quick! Send him within reach of my hand, and—I'll do the rest!"

His thoughts could go no further than that one point: the death of Darke Cruger!

If he might only be granted a fair chance to strike that devil, as he had stricken this nobler beast! Only one stroke—with such hot hatred fiercely raging in his heart, he could not miss his aim!

Would he never come? What was detaining him so long? Was he—bitterest thought of all!—was he even now wreaking his devilish spite on those poor, weak, helpless women?

It is moments like these that will blanch a strong man's hair, if mental torture can do that much.

And he could do nothing but wait! He dared not move. He could not give free vent even to his curses of rage, lest that crafty demon be on the watch, and thus his last hope be wrested from him.

He could only wait—wait—wait until each minute seemed an age, the hour nothing less than eternity!

Time and time again did he force his tortured brain to picture the instant when his vengeance-nerved right hand should drive that bloody blade, haft deep, into heart or brain; for thus alone could he vary the picture. Now he was splitting skull, then puncturing heart, or driving the keen dagger through that foul throat, to wrench the blade forth, and bring windpipe and all with it for company!

For the time being Anderson Filley was little better than a madman, but some allowance ought to be made for him. He had already suffered enough to upset almost any brain, and each second was equal to an hour of ordinary suffering.

And—he could only wait—wait, and feel all the torments of the eternally damned!

For fully an hour after lying down to counter-

feit death, the rancher waited, but at length his reward seemed at hand. He caught the sound of a heavy step overhead, followed in a few moments by a creaking sound as the doubly-binged trap was lifted up a short distance. Then—

"The cat has killed him, by the Eternal!"

CHAPTER XV.

SMUGGLER DUKE AND HIS MASTER.

JACK BROOME gave neither of his comrades a chance to argue the case, but with bared blade gleaming redly in the rays of the lantern still held by Martin Westgate, he leaned over the senseless youth, aiming a vicious stroke at his unprotected bosom.

An angry ejaculation burst from the lips of Smuggler's master, but whatever his will, his ability was lacking, just then, and only for the noble St. Bernard himself, murder most foul would have been the ending.

Swiftly as Jack Broome struck, his weapon never reached its mark, for, with a deep growl, Smuggler caught his arm, hurling him against the ruffian with resistless force, knocking him backward into the river.

"Curse—don't—" gasped the would-be assassin, terror stricken by those mighty jaws which clashed together so close to his face, after giving the arm a fierce shake which sent the knife far away.

"Duke! you, Duke!" cried his master, who had been fairly upset by that sudden rush and scramble.

"Le' me—out o' the way, an' I'll shoot the mad critter!" Sabe Wolfert cried, swinging his rifle around from his back.

"Kill him, and I'll kill you!" angrily retorted Westgate, gaining his footing in the shallow water, and pushing the old hunter back with one strong hand, while the other fixed on Smuggler Duke's neck.

"Take him off! He's—" gasped Broome, his appeal ending in a strangling sound as his lifted head went back under the surface as the angry dog snapped his teeth sharply before that frightened face.

"Back, Duke! Down, I tell you!" sternly commanded his master, and yielding to that authority the St. Bernard retreated as far as the body of young Maurice Filley, his massive head crossing the lad's bosom, while one protecting paw gently rested on a shoulder.

"Get up, you floundering ass!" angrily growled Westgate, fastening a hand upon the smuggler and jerking him to the edge of the water. "If you hadn't—if you had, cursed if I wouldn't have cheered the dog on, in place of pulling him off!"

Jack Broome was too thoroughly cowed just then to make retort, but old Wolfert gave an ugly growl as he disgustedly eyed the dog.

"The durned whelp hain't fitten to live! To grup a man like that! Ef 'twas me, he wouldn't never do it twicet, he wouldn't!"

Ordinarily Martin Westgate was good-natured enough to suit the most captious, but Duke was his idol, and the manner in which Wolfert handled his rifle, caused his hot blood to boil over.

"You wouldn't, wouldn't you? A dog that'd bite you, ought to be shot, only a man'd have to be thundering smart on trigger, or the poison'd get in its work ahead of his gun! And as for you, Jack Broome," turning upon the other smuggler, "what right had you to draw knife on Duke's findings, I'd like to know?"

"Didn't he play spy? Didn't he sneak up and catch us both— I say he ought to croak, and croak he shall, too!"

"Me first, then, not counting Duke!" sternly retorted Westgate, drawing a revolver, and falling back to the side of his dog, turning the full rays from his lantern into the faces of his comrades.

"Shore we wouldn't— Don't shoot, Mart!"

"Sure I will, if you try to crowd me too mighty hard," came the grim warning and defiance, both in one. "Watch 'em, Duke, old fellow!"

An answering growl came from the dog, and both Wolfert and Broome recoiled a bit, neither caring to press such a quarrel.

"You're too cranky—you and your cur, pardner," growlingly said the signal-man, flinging up an empty hand by way of truce. "I was only trying to save the gang's secret from leaking, and here you act as if I wanted more'n my lawful rights!"

"You're not the chief, Jack, and he alone has the power of life or death, and you know as much," retorted Westgate. "When he hears the whole rights of this squabble—"

"He'll say I was right, for rocks!"

"Name your figures, Jackey, just so you don't oversize mine, and I'll cover your bet," sharply retorted the other. "But keep your steel in cover, unless you want to feel Duke's teeth in your earnest!"

"Look at the whelp!" growled Wolfert, yet not without a growing interest in the picture thus presented. "Durned ef he hain't a-kissin' o' the kid!"

"He's your meat, because you picked him up adrift, eh, Duke?" chuckled his master, bending to drop a caressing touch upon that noble head.

"Wur-roo-oo!"

Smuggler Duke ceased licking that pale face long enough to utter a whining growl while looking into his master's face, then fell to work again as though the restoration of life was part of his duty.

"Douse the glim, mate!" croaked Broome, hastily, as his suspicious eyes noted a slight stir on the part of the youngster. "D'ye want him to spot us all, man alive?"

Martin Westgate closed his lantern, swiftly shutting off all light save that so scantily afforded by the cloud-obscured moon; but there was a grim warning in the mutter which bore that action company:

"No tricks on travelers, both o' ye! Watch him, Duke! Stay by him, old lad!"

Stepping past the dog and his charge, Westgate added, lowly:

"Fall back a bit, mates, where the kid can't hear us easy, and we'll try to settle the muddle, out o' hand."

Neither of the other smugglers offered any opposition to this amicable suggestion, possibly because they felt that two voices ought to prevail against one, in case the matter came to a vote.

"You ought to see through it, Mart," began Broome, a surly touch in voice and in manner, as quick as they were beyond easy ear-shot of the rallying youngster. "He must have been spying on us, for I fell all over him up yonder, just after giving you the signal to come across. And—feel of my jaw, if you don't reckon!"

"I'd rather undertake to feel of a forty-acre lot!"

"It's good sense Jack talks, I'm thinkin'," interposed Wolfert. "I hain't gwine to do no mo' jobs like this, 'ceptin' the kid's croaked! Who's to tell 'tain't hangin' we'll all be, an' that afore we fairly knows it, ef he's turned loose to spit out all he likes ag'inst us?"

"Have you both had your say-so?" curtly demanded Duke's master.

"I say the boy can't go free!"

"Them's me, too!"

"All right, mates, I reckon it's my turn, now, and here I come! I'm not saying that the kid shall go free, just now, but this much I do say, and I'm backing up my words, too!"

"I never yet knew Duke to make a mistake in judging a person, for or against. He's froze to the lad, and stands ready to fight for him, even against you two fellows, whom he has known so much longer. So I say—hands off!"

"How far off, and how long?"

"Isn't that plain enough for you? All right! This is my meaning, then: *No butchering!* You've got both Duke and Duke's master to down before you can croak the kid!"

"What's the matter wi' totin' him to the boss?" suggested Wolfert, as a compromise. "I'm willin' to let the kunnel settle it all, I be!"

"He'll curse us all for putting him to the bother," growled Jack Broome, yielding with an ill grace. "You two don't know it, maybe, since you've been away so long, but the chief has warned us all to keep a lookout against both Anderson Filley and this cub!"

"All right; we'll tote him to the chief, then," said Westgate, willingly accepting the offered compromise.

Retracing their steps, they found Maurice Filley rallying, and before he could clear his confused senses sufficiently to resist his eyes were bandaged and his hands tied behind his back.

All of this was done by Martin Westgate, for neither of his comrades cared to risk arousing Duke's sentiment by lending a hand. And it was Martin Westgate who steadied the youngster on his feet, then guided his steps down the river shore.

This enforced exercise quickly worked its own good, and as his confused wits began to clear, Maurice began an appeal for help, not for himself but for his mother and his sister.

"Oh, button!" growled Westgate in disguised tones, forcing his charge onward as he tried to plead. "Wait until we get where talking's easy, can't ye, kid?"

Leaving Westgate, backed by Duke, to manage the prisoner, Broome and Wolfert pressed on to the canoe, shouldering the packs which they found there, leaving the birch where it was stranded for the present.

Robbed of its illegal contents, the frail bark could tell no dangerous tales, even should it be noted by unfriendly eyes before it was called for.

The time spent in scaling that high and rocky bank was utilized by Maurice Filley in trying to decide upon his wisest course for the immediate future.

He only spoke once, and that was to hint how much more easy their progress would be if he had the use of hands and eyes.

"I'm running this, youngster," gruffly retorted Westgate, in tones so unnatural that Duke gave a low whine of perplexity. "You just go as I shove, and I reckon we'll get there, in time."

Strange as it may appear, Maurice had received no serious injury through his ugly trip and fall down the steep bank.

As the broken bough which had been noted in

his hand bore evidence, he had tried to save himself while falling, and in goodly measure had broken the full force of his drop. The shock had been sufficient to deprive him of his senses, however, and had not Smuggler Duke come to the rescue so promptly, those senses would hardly have been recovered, shallow as was the water into which he had fallen.

But the boy gave merely a passing thought to his escape from death through falling. His anxiety was wholly on account of his mother and sister, from whose side he had been driven by the grief which he had felt unable to hide from them in any different manner. Now—were they still safe in the cave?

Would not the Indians be keen enough to track them thither, even if they remained quietly in hiding? But, *would* they so remain? Would they not be frightened by their prolonged absence, and add to their peril by setting forth in search of him?

When the rough climbing was completed, and the three smugglers gained the comparatively level ground above the river, Maurice once more ventured an appeal, and once more received a rude rebuff.

"Shut trap, I tell you, kid!" growled Westgate, who appeared willing enough to abuse the youngster, though he had so boldly defended him from others.

"But—are you men, not devils?" desperately cried the boy. "If you are white men, help me save my mother and sister from the Sioux! The woods are full of them, and—"

"Ah-h! you're crazier'n a loon, kid!" contemptuously interrupted the smuggler, forcing his captive ahead through the night. "Redskins be blowed! There isn't a Sioux buck inside of a hundred miles o' this, and any one but a looney'd know it, too! Mog, or you'll fare worse!"

Hot and dangerous words fought hard for exit, but Maurice managed to choke them down. He felt sure that he had fallen into the hands of the smugglers, now, and that he was being taken to some place of imprisonment, if not still worse.

If his eyes were free to see just how many there were of his captors! If he could only strike a blow—*why not?*

The thongs knotted about his wrists were loose enough to give his hands a little play as he mechanically tried them when that fancy flashed across his troubled brain. And so, using caution, but straining his muscles to good purpose, Maurice tried to break or, failing that, to slip his hands free from the cords.

Apparently Maurice Westgate never thought of his captive's making such an effort, for he only rested a hand on one shoulder, sufficiently to steer the blindfolded youngster clear of obstacles as they passed on through the gloom. Or, it may be, he trusted in Duke to give him warning in case mischief should be brewing.

Be all that as it may, nothing happened to check Maurice in his silent, guarded fight against his bonds, and little by little he succeeded in slipping the knots further along, until one slender hand came free, and the thong dropped noiselessly away from the other!

Westgate was walking close beside him, and Maurice stealthily moved a hand toward his middle. His fingers touched the polished butt of a revolver, and jerking the weapon free, he slipped from Martin's grip!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUGAR IS DOUBLY SURPRISED.

AT the same instant, Maurice tore the bandage from over his eyes, and flinging up his weapon, he fired a shot at the first figure he dimly outlined, then turned to flee for more than his own life.

With a sharp, angry cry Martin Westgate reeled back from that blinding flash, while both of his mates were utterly bewildered by such a sudden and unexpected change in the situation. So far as they all three were concerned, Maurice might have succeeded in his bold stroke for liberty, but as his master reeled back, Smuggler Duke leaped forward, striking heavily against the lad, knocking him down.

The shock threw the pistol from his hand, but he grappled desperately with the huge animal, burying both hands in that shaggy throat, at the same time trying to writhe from under that heavy weight, so he might regain his feet and resume his flight.

"Guard him, Duke!" cried Westgate, quickly rallying. "Hold him, old fellow!"

"Kill him! Slit his heart wide open!" cried Jack Broome, rallying from his amazement, and leaping forward, knife in hand once more.

"Stand back, cuss ye!" growled Westgate, giving the sanguinary rascal a trip and a fling that sent him sprawling, half a score feet away. "I'm running this job, ye want to know!"

The next instant his muscular hands were closing upon the boy, and at a word from his master, Duke drew aside, though still on guard.

"I'll kill you, devil!" gasped poor Maurice, fairly beside himself with fierce disappointment as he struggled vainly in that powerful grip.

"My mother—let me go to—"

"Lay down, and button up, ye hot-headed idiot!" growled Westgate, flinging the youngster

flat on his face, a heavy knee digging into his back and holding him helpless while fresh bonds were applied to his wrists and others above his elbows.

After all, a slender lad is but an easy conquest for a big, healthy man, and almost before he could fairly realize how utterly his bold stroke had failed, Maurice Filley was once more a helpless captive.

Then, as Martin Westgate rose to his feet, leaving Duke on guard over his youthful prize, Jack Broome sulkily growled forth:

"Got more sense into that thick pate of yours, I reckon, pardner? Reckon you're willing enough for me to croak the whelp, eh?"

"Try it on, if you want another taste of Duke, Jack," grimly retorted the smuggler, using one hand to thrust the bloodthirsty knave back, while feeling gingerly of his face with the other.

"Hit ye hard, mate?" asked Wolfert, taking note of that action, deep though the gloom was just there.

"Just a crease, I reckon," replied Westgate, with relief in his tones, as he concluded that examination by touch. "Blamed if I didn't think my whole cabeza was gone, though, first off!"

"Pity it hadn't!" muttered Broome, in disgusted tones, then hastily adding, as though to hinder Westgate from forcibly objecting to such a kindly expression: "Well, what's the next circus act, mate?"

"Just what we marked out at first: take him to the boss, of course, and let him do the deciding."

Without waiting for further remarks, Westgate turned back to where Smuggler Duke was on duty, grasping Maurice by the collar and jerking him unceremoniously to his feet, then growling:

"Fooling's played, kid, and so'll you be, next, if you try to cut up any more didoes. Mog along, now, will ye?"

Maurice staggered forward under that rude impulse, but then hung a limp weight on his captor's hands.

"What's the matter with ye, kid? Duke didn't tooth ye, and I know it! Stand up, can't ye?"

"Where are you trying to take me to?" demanded Maurice, in tones clear and strong enough to banish any suspicion of physical weakness.

"What's that to you?"

"Where are you taking me to?" repeated; he lad, now upheld only by that strong grip; not an ounce of his weight was supported by his own limbs.

"To a doctor who'll know how to treat ye, kid," grimly chuckled his immediate guard, giving him a rude shake. "It's kill or cure with him, and if you try any such foolishness as this on him, I'm laying long odds it'll be kill, too!"

Maurice did not ask more, but he flatly declined to aid in his own captivity. Rudely as Westgate might shake him, his limbs remained limp and nerveless, so far as supporting his body was concerned.

"Give him the spur, man!" impatiently growled Jack Broome. "We can't afford to spend all night here, fooling over the whelp! Give him the spur, I say—or I will!"

"You'll get it in your own ribs, matey if you make a try," coolly retorted Westgate, then clasping Maurice about the middle, he swung the lad over his shoulder, grimly chuckling: "There's more ways than one to skin a cat, and I'm a mighty tough critter to beat, kid! See who'll grow tired out first: rider, or rough trotter!"

Yielding with an ill-grace to his self-willed comrade, Jack Broome strode on ahead, Sabe Wolfert keeping him company, with the burdened smuggler and his dog bringing up the rear.

Mart Westgate was not long in convincing his prisoner that his hint as to rough riding meant business, for he seemed to take particular pains in adding to each jolt and swaying; but Maurice doggedly held his peace. He knew that coaxing or threatening were worse than useless, and it was some slight satisfaction to feel that he was making his enemies all the trouble that lay in his power.

It was a long, hard jaunt, but neither bearer nor burden made complaint, and Westgate gruffly declined assistance when it was offered by his comrades.

Possibly he feared treachery on their part, should they gain even such partial possession of the youngster. Not that he cared so much for a human life, but he had stood up for the life his dog had saved, in the first place, and he would not go back on his record now.

At length a halt was called, and dropping Maurice carelessly to the ground, bidding Duke stand guard, Westgate drew his mates far enough to one side to talk without risk of their words being caught by the ears of the prisoner.

"I've been thinking, mates," he said, seriously, "that maybe it'd be better for us all if we waited for his say-so before rushing the kid in on the boss at his ranch. What's your idea about it?"

"That it's all a cursed piece of botchwork!"

growled Broome. "He ought never to have come out of the drink with breath in his body! And only for you, he wouldn't, neither!"

"Oh, quit yer snarlin', all two both o' ye!" muttered Sabe Wolfert, in tones of disgust. "What's did, is did, an' that ends so much. Now, I say, with Mart: best let the boss know, fu'st off."

"All right; I'll stay with the kid, and either or both of you fellows can carry the news. It isn't so far that the round trip'll wear your hoofs down to the quick, I reckon!"

"I'll go, and I'll tell the boss just how it was, mind ye!"

"See that you do, then," grimly retorted Westgate. "I never could get along smoothly with a liar, and—see that you do, old fellow!"

Full of venomous anger, but afraid to yield to the fierce impulse that urged him to silence those mocking lips forever, Jack Broome turned away and made all haste to reach the Lone Ranch, hoping that Colonel Cougar would bear him out in his sanguinary longings.

Although the distance to be covered was not very great, it consumed time enough to enable Jack Broome to smooth off the rough edges of the report he had to make, and when at length the Lone Ranch was reached and an entrance effected, he was ready to tell his story.

"Well!" curtly demanded the chief, as the signal-man stood before him. "Didn't the boys come over?"

"Yes, sir," bowed Broome, hat in hand, the picture of respect for his master. "They came all right, but—"

"Something went wrong, then? Out with it, in a lump! I've got other business on hand to-night, and— Out with it, I say!"

"The boys came, sir, and there was no trouble at all about the signaling, only—we caught a spy!"

"The deuce you say! Caught a spy? Not—Who was it? How did it happen? Curse you for a meaty-mouthed idiot!" raged Colonel Cougar, swinging his clinched fists and stamping his feet heavily in his excitement.

Jack Broome shrunk back, half-stunned by that unlooked-for outburst, and, seeing this, the chief fought back his hot temper, saying, in milder tones:

"I'm sure you wasn't at fault, Jack, for you've been tried and proved far too often for doubt to touch you. So—tell me all!"

Thus encouraged, Broome began his report, not going dangerously wide of the truth, but taking particular pains to clear his own shoulders of suspicious carelessness.

He declared that he worked the signals as usual, taking every precaution against discovery by other eyes than those expected with goods.

"But there was a spy watching the boat, boss, and as I started down the bank to meet the boys I run across him. He tried to run—you can see where he hit me in the jaw with a rock—but I caught him, and threw him over the rocks into the drink!"

"Who was it? You made sure he got his last dose, of course?"

"It was young Filley—"

Colonel Cougar more nearly than ever resembled his namesake just then, for it was a wild beast leap that carried him upon the signal-man, gripping him savagely as he snarled:

"You didn't—if you killed him, I'll tear you—I'll throw you to feed Grim Death, you idiot!"

"No—I didn't—he's alive!" gasped Broome, then staggering like a drunken man as the chief released him, saved from falling only by bringing up against the nearest wall.

"You didn't kill him?" more calmly asked Colonel Cougar, that mad glitter fading in his eyes, his empurpled countenance growing more natural. "You surely didn't let the whelp escape you, though?"

"They've got him—Westgate and Wolfert, sir," huskily stammered the frightened signal-man, longing yet fearing to break away from that dangerous presence.

"Where have they got him? Why didn't you fetch him here?"

Now that Colonel Cougar had resumed his customary manner, Jack Broome rallied his courage, and briefly explained where he had left their prisoner, and why he had deemed it wisest to come on in advance with the news.

"You were right in doing so, old fellow," nodded the chief, at the same time holding forth a couple of bank-notes as a peace offering.

"Rub those over my finger-marks, Jacky, and forget that I treated you a bit too roughly," he added, in apologetic tones.

"You can do it some more, at the same price, colonel," grinned the knave, as he pocketed the precious salve. "Now—shall I go fetch the kid right here, boss?"

"Yes; fetch him here! And I'll see that neither of you three lads soon forget the job you've pulled off this night! Go, now, and make all haste back with young Filley."

Jack Broome ducked his head, then hastily left the room and building on that mission, while Colonel Cougar strode lightly to and fro for a few minutes, rubbing his hands gleefully together.

"Both—got 'em both!" he chuckled, in unholy glee. "I'll use one to play off against the other, and if I can't make a clean winning out of this combination, then—well, I'd ought to lose! Just ought to lose it all!"

From son, his thoughts reverted to father, whom he had left in the stone cell beneath the rear room, and eager to begin the torments which were to bring him a doubly sweet revenge, Colonel Cougar hastened to that apartment, bending over the cunningly arranged trap-door.

With the point of a knife he pried up a neatly inserted block of wood, laying bare the hidden mechanism. Manipulating this to lift in place of depressing the trap, he knelt on the floor, casting a curious but guarded glance into the cell beneath.

Knowing that Anderson Filley was armed with a dagger, he was guarding against a possible cast, but the instant his gaze fell upon those two figures lying near the further wall, an ejaculation of angry amazement burst from his throat.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FORLORN HOPE FOILED.

"THE cat has killed him, by the Eternal!" cried Colonel Cougar, as he caught sight of those blood-stained bodies lying together; and in his savage consternation at such an unexpected termination to his newly-born hopes, he came perilously near falling headlong through the trap.

Not for a single instant did he suspect the truth: that, far from being slain by the cougar, Anderson Filley was lying there, dagger in hand, putting a terrible restraint upon himself and his passions, silently praying that, for once, Satan might fail his satellite long enough for Colonel Cougar to come within fair reach of his avenging arm.

"Death—Grim Death, you devil!" cried out the smuggler chief, to the mountain lion, as yet unable to believe in the death of his ugly pet, even though he could see the patches of blood which darkened its tawny coat.

The cougar did not stir, as it surely would on hearing a human voice, and the intensely excited smuggler gave vent to another blistering curse, at the same time flinging the trap-door wide open.

He could not even begin to comprehend how this encounter had come about, in those first startled moments, and through his angry amazement there would persist in crowding the trifling query: How could he have opened that locked door?

Once more Colonel Cougar called out to Grim Death, but neither of those blood-stained bodies gave sign of life, and swinging his feet through the trap, hanging to the flooring with his hands for an instant to steady himself, the smuggler chief dropped to the bottom of the pit.

Even yet he never once dreamed of a snare being laid for his punishment, and springing forward, Colonel Cougar bent to grasp the neck of Grim Death by its loose skin, meaning to drag it clear of the rancher who had met such an unexpected doom.

Swift and viciously struck Anderson Filley, meaning to drive his blade through that muscular throat, down, until its point should find and forever still that evil heart.

"Now I have got ye!" he snarlingly cried, as he struck.

But it was not to end then, nor thus. Colonel Cougar instinctively dodged, just as a man will wink when something swiftly menaces his eye.

He did not entirely escape, but instead of piercing his throat, the dagger simply tore through the tough muscles of his breast, barely below the skin, and his backward leap jerked the handle from the fingers of the desperate prisoner.

If Filley had been less sure of his aim, he might, and doubtless would, have clung to the weapon for a repeated stroke, but the fact of his being disarmed did not hinder his following Colonel Cougar as he retreated in bewildered surprise.

"I'll kill you! I'll tear your heart out and eat it!" he raged, one hand clutching at throat, the other at the gleaming dagger-hilt; but Colonel Cougar quickly rallied, and a swift stroke knocked the rancher's head back, partially checking his mad rush, and foiling his grasp.

"Say you will, eh?" snarlingly cried the smuggler, closing with his desperate antagonist, breast to breast. "Well—do it—if you can!"

Both men were muscular and active beyond the ordinary. Both were still in their prime, and the fewer years of Cruger were counterbalanced by the more temperate life which Filley had led.

The rancher was fighting for much more than his own life, and the thoughts of his dear ones seemed to lend him double strength: yet, do all he might, he could not prevail!

For fully five long minutes that furious wrestle lasted, and then came to an end by both men going down together: only, Colonel Cougar was on top, and giving a short, hard laugh of grim triumph as he maintained the grip which threat-

ened to crush in the ribs of his panting adversary.

He lifted his voice in a sharp, far-reaching call for help, then quickly spoke to his antagonist, despite Filley's renewed struggles:

"I could have ended it long ago, man, dear, but I wanted to prove to you—will you?—that I'm just the man you want for a son-in-law! If I can take your measure—All right, Plunkett! Just come down!"

With a cry of amazement, the lieutenant dropped through the trap, quickly followed by two or three other men, and resigning his prisoner to their hands, Colonel Cougar sprang to his feet, settling his garments with a careless shake, then picking up the dagger which had played so important a part in the events of that evening.

Exhausted by his terrific struggles, Anderson Filley was quickly overcome, and his arms temporarily secured with a belt which one of the men supplied. Then having in the mean time satisfied his natural curiosity concerning Grim Death and the manner of his taking off, Colonel Cougar bade one of the smugglers "give him a back," and lightly balancing himself thereon long enough to catch a firm hold on the edges of the opening above, swung himself easily to the upper chamber.

He found and dropped down one end of a rope-ladder, by making use of which Plunkett and his men were not long in hoisting the bound rancher out of the death cell.

"All right, boys, and much obliged," said their chieftain as he was looked to for further instructions. "I reckon we can get along together without much more monkeying."

"Hadn't I better tie him up a bit snugger, sir?" asked Plunkett, hesitatingly.

"Hardly worth while, is it? Reckon I can handle the dear fellow, even if he should turn foolish enough to kick up a muss. And so—Good-evening, gentlemen!"

Headed by Plunkett, the smugglers turned to leave the room, and they were passing forth when Colonel Cougar gave them a parting word:

"You needn't come in unless I give the regular call, gentlemen; but if Mr. Filley should happen to jump out without my passing the good word, call a halt on him, even if you have to blow his brains out!"

"All right, sir; we'll obey orders to the very letter."

As the door closed behind Milo Plunkett and his fellows, Colonel Cougar turned toward the prisoner, who leaned heavily against the wall, weak and unnerved for the time being, so far as his bodily powers were concerned.

"Well, old fellow, how do you think you're feeling, after your little spurge? Ever run across the famous history of Bluebeard and his too inquisitive wife, may I ask?"

"Are you all devil?" huskily asked the rancher, and by so doing, giving his enemy the very clew he was seeking: whether or no his past experience had at all weakened his iron nerve.

"I?" in mock surprise. "I beg of you, daddy, don't think that way! After all I've done for you, too! After letting you maul and haul and stick me to your heart's content, just to prove myself worthy of—"

"If not all devil, show mercy, Cruger," Filley interposed, by a desperate effort choking down his fierce hatred for the man who, he could no longer deny, held him helpless in his evil grip.

"Take a seat, Mr. Filley," smoothly purred the human cougar, placing a chair for his victim, with a bow that was doubly insolent through its very politeness. "You look overheated, my dear fellow! I'll never forgive myself for forgetting—By the way, may I ask just how you happened to pick a row with your next door neighbor, sir?"

"Was that part of your devilish scheme, Darke Cruger?"

"What! turning you two critters together, to eat or be eaten?"

"I killed him—I only wish 'twas you, instead!" cried the rancher, with a reviving flash of spirit.

Colonel Cougar gave a short, grim chuckle as he gingerly parted the bosom of his flannel shirt, taking a glance at the ugly-looking gash which marked the course of the dagger. His garments were pretty well dampened, but the wound was superficial, and the bleeding had about ceased.

"Well, old neighbor, you did your prettiest to make it me, didn't you?" he retorted, closing his shirt, and apparently giving his wound no further care. "So used to tering brands when you make an investment in stock, that you couldn't help marking a son-in-law, eh?"

Anderson Filley plainly fought for self-control, and Colonel Cougar seemed content to grant him all the time he required. Unless his face told lies, he was hugely enjoying himself, after a malicious fashion, just then.

It was doubly hard to humble himself so far, particularly before a man whom he hated so intensely, but Filley forced himself to think of his helpless ones, and that lent him the power to beg.

"You can't be all devil, Darke Cruger, for

your mother was a woman," he began, his voice husky and under but poor control. "Then—in her name I ask it, man! Save my family from—The red-skins are raiding, as you know for yourself!"

"Just a straggling band, from Sitting Bull, old fellow."

"Too many—far too many for women to beat off, though! You saw how hardly they pressed me. Others were chasing my—my son. They may have—killed him! Or—they may have tracked him home, and then—Let me go to them, I pray you, Cruger!"

It was more bitter than death, pleading to such a villain, and despite his efforts to the contrary, Anderson Filley could not entirely hide his intense loathing for the smuggler chief.

Possibly this had something to do with hardening the heart of the man in authority, for there was an evil sneer in his tones as he made reply to that appeal:

"Let you go, eh? And, if I was so simple, of course you would not take advantage of my weakness, Filley? Of course you wouldn't scratch down another list of names, with mine at the head as chief cook and bottle-washer? Of course you wouldn't cut and run for a hole to hide in until the smoke of battle was over? Oh, no, you wouldn't!"

"I pledge you my word of honor, Cruger, that—"

"Your w-h-a-t?"

A bitter retort sprang up in the throat of the rancher, but he smothered it for his dear ones' sake, saying, instead:

"Let me go place them in safety, Colonel Cruger, and I'll come back here without delay. I swear it as a man: I'll come back and yield myself to your hands, to treat as you may see fit. Only let me go save my—my family!"

"You say you would come back again, Filley?"

"Yes. Dictate any oath you feel faith in, and I'll swear to it."

Colonel Cruger lifted his hands in mock amazement, then muttered:

"Well, well, marvels will never cease! I've heard of such things, but I always set them down as rank lies! And—I'm thinking that way still!"

His malicious chuckle sent the blood hotly to the face of his captive, for Filley could not mistake the truth: he was being made sport of, and all his prayers could never soften the heart of this villain.

Colonel Cougar suddenly altered his tactics, and his face was as serious as his tones were grave when next he spoke:

"Maybe I'm not such a heartless demon as you seem to think, Filley. I took thought of your family, long ago, and sent a few trusty fellows across that way to see that all went well with them. But—"

"You're not fooling me, man?" hoarsely demanded the rancher.

"I say that I sent men to guard and look after your family, sir, directly after bringing you here; but I'm beginning to fear that something has gone wrong, or else—"

He cut himself short, one hand rising to smooth his beard, or to wipe out that uneasy change of countenance which Filley was swift to catch.

"You mean—Oh, man!" with an echo of fierce despair ringing through his voice. "Let me go to them! I'll be your bound slave for the rest of my days, if you'll only let me go and learn for myself."

If he heard, Colonel Cougar showed no signs of heeding. With his head inclined toward the door, he muttered, as if to himself:

"Yes, I'm beginning to fear something's gone wrong! Surely, the lads ought to have reported by this time, if—Eh?" turning toward his tortured captive with a half-dazed expression on his face.

"Devil! will you never listen?" groaned poor Filley, in agony.

"Patience, dear fellow," chuckled Cougar, casting aside all disguise as the expected sound came to his keen ears. "Wait a bit, and you can ask for news of the ladies from your son with your own lips."

"What! you surely have not—"

"My men fished the lad out of the river, and are bringing him here!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

PARLEYING WITH THE ENEMY.

PELEG OUNCE uttered those startling words with a voice that fear rendered well-nigh unrecognizable and there was no room left for doubting his thorough earnestness. Right or wrong, he was sincere in his belief that a squad of the dreaded Sioux braves had surprised them there at the deserted ranch.

White-horse Wheeler caught the same ominous sounds, an instant later, and knowing how scant was the chance of finding friends in these night-riders, he sprang to the table on which stood the burning lamp, blowing out the light, and casting all about them into complete darkness.

"Steady, man!" he muttered, sternly, to his companion for the hour. "Wait, and do as I do if it's the red imps!"

Peleg Ounce made no reply, but a chair was overturned in the dark, as though the frightened fellow was making for a place of hiding.

White-horse Wheeler gave a surly growl of rage, but before he could take any decided step, a clear, not unpleasant voice came from without, in hasty hailing:

"Hello, the house! Don't shoot, Filley! We're friends!"

That voice was unmistakably white, and Wheeler felt a bit easier in mind as he drew that conclusion; but not for long. A dismal groan came from the corner into which Peleg Ounce had retreated, followed by the frightened words:

"Good Lawd! now I will ketch it—dead shore, fer sart'in!"

"What do you mean, man?" hastily demanded Wheeler. "Who is it, and why are you frightened of him?"

"The young boss—wuss luck!" groaned Peleg, still more dismally.

"And who is—not of the smugglers? Quick! the truth, I say!"

"Yes—Plunkett—next to the kunnel, an' he'll bloody murder me ef he ketches—"

"I say, Mrs. Filley!" a little more sharply cried the voice without doors. "We're friends, come to warn you of danger! The Sioux are on a raid, and unless you're in a hurry, they may catch us all in a box!"

In such moments a man's brain does swift work, and with a barely perceptible delay, White-horse Wheeler assumed a feminine tone, to call back:

"Who is it? I don't—who are you, sir?"

"Plunkett—Milo Plunkett, ma'am, you know!" and there came a sound as of hasty dismounting just in front of the door. Open, and I'll explain, though we haven't any time to lose, I'm sorry to say!"

"Don't ye—don't let 'em in, boss!" huskily mumbled Peleg, a faint rustle showing that he was shifting his position, but in no less guarded tones, White-horse Wheeler sent back the warning:

"Steady, you fool! Betray me, and I'll kill you, if I never lift a finger again! Play white, and I'll pull you through all right!"

There was no time for more, just then. Milo Plunkett was rapping impatiently against the front door, and as this was not barred, only his dislike to offend the lady of the house hindered his flinging the barrier wide.

There was no time to pick and choose, and without trying to disguise his voice this bout, White-horse Wheeler clearly and distinctly called out:

"Steady, there! Keep your distance until you've shown cause, or I'll open fire!"

With a startled ejaculation Plunkett recoiled from the doorstep, then hastily cried aloud:

"Don't shoot! We're friends, and—Mrs. Filley, I say!"

"I'm doing the saying, just at present, stranger, and you don't want to let that fact slip your memory, neither! Now—what is it you're after, anyway?"

There was a slight pause, as though the startled lieutenant was trying to collect his scattered wits, but when he did speak, it was to the point:

"The red-skins are on the rampage, and we reckoned it was only white to call and see if we couldn't help the ladies out. But—you're not Anderson Filley, nor Maurice? Then who in thunder are you?"

"The man who's holding this fort, just now," retorted Wheeler, playing for time in which to decide upon his best course of procedure. "If it's a fair question to sling back, who in thunder and blazes are you?"

"My name is Plunkett, and either Mrs. Filley or Linda can vouch for me. Ask them, if you don't—"

"I only wish I could ask them!"

"Well, why don't you ask, then?"

The lieutenant of smugglers was clearly growing irritable, and knowing that he could not "hold the fort" much longer, without calling powder and ball into play, the revenue detective made reply:

"For a mighty good reason, pardner, and that is—they're not at home, just now!"

"What! you surely don't mean—What do you mean, anyway, confound you, sir?" angrily burst forth Plunkett, adding as though to an armed force:

"Ready, lads! Blow him through if he tries to break away!"

"I'm ready, already, pardner, and I'll blow you through if you try to break in," coolly retorted White-horse Wheeler, stepping silently to one side to guard against a possible shot through the door.

"Play white, and there'll be no shooting, only—I'm going to see just what and who you are! If you have no rights here, or if you can't explain yourself—look out, you!"

"Will you give me a fair chance to do that same explaining, sir?" demanded Wheeler, in more placable tones. "Will you give me your word as a white man not to shoot until you see fair cause?"

"And you, on your side?"

"I'll give the same pledge, and as a proof, I'll light up before you come in. Is it a bargain, stranger?"

"Yes! Strike a light, and let's see through this mix, if we can."

White-horse Wheeler knew that he was incurring no slight degree of risk in taking such a step, since the light would surely betray him to an enemy before he could catch a sight in turn; but his profession had hardened him to danger, and he really did not see how he could act any differently, without too plainly arousing ugly suspicions.

With a cocked revolver in his right hand, and facing the door, he removed the lamp chimney, struck a match, which he held shielded by his person until it was in a fair blaze. Then touching the wick, he replaced the chimney, stepping quickly aside as he cried out:

"All lighted, friends, and you can pull the latch-string as quick as you like!"

The door flew open at a thrust, and Milo Plunkett, pistols in hand, sprung into the room, sternly crying aloud:

"Come in, lads! And you—Hello, stranger!"

He caught sight of White-horse Wheeler standing at ease, a smile on his face if a gun was in his grip. He cast a keen, searching look around the room, but made no discovery of other parties.

"Just me, pardner," easily said Wheeler, as his gaze made the same tour, though he felt an uneasy surprise at failing to discover aught of Peleg Ounce. "And I'm mighty glad to see only white faces, where I fully expected to see red-skins, too!"

"Who are you?" roughly demanded Plunkett, his darkly handsome face rendered almost ugly by that scowl of strong suspicion.

"I'm Edgar Winston, and I came here on pretty much the same friendly mission that brought you, I reckon," was the easy response. "You did come to lend a helping hand to the ladies, didn't you?"

"What do you know of them? Why aren't they here, now?"

"Well, because they've gone somewhere else, I reckon. Don't grow cranky, my dear sir," with a bland smile coming into his honest face as Plunkett seemed inclined to show his teeth. "I'm giving you as straight answers as my tongue knows how. There was nobody at home when I struck the ranch, only a few minutes before you came up."

The two men gazed steadily at each other, like rivals taking note.

White-horse Wheeler, it may be said here, was something above the average height of mankind, and would very nearly, if not quite, graze a six-foot standard while passing beneath it in his socks.

He stood erect, with broad shoulders and deep chest. His body tapered slightly down to his well-rounded waist, then swelled, giving him long, muscular thighs and strong legs.

His curling hair, worn rather long, was black as the coat of a crow in full plumage, while mustaches and a thick imperial adorned his face.

That was one of his best points, being strong without coarseness, good-looking without being effeminately handsome, and honest without the faintest qualification.

His dress was that of a man who expects to rough it for the time being, or pretty much such as a cowboy would select when on semi-duty, or looking for a job under a new master, who might like his men to appear neat, without being herd-dandies.

His felt hat was too soft in texture and limber of brim to be a true cowboy "cart-wheel," but there was no discount on the weapons he carried, or the cartridge-studded belt of stout webbing with which his middle was girded; tools and "cinch" were pure "cow-puncher."

On the other hand, Milo Plunkett offered a compromise between city man and lumber-lad, with a tinge of backwoods sport thrown in. His clothes were from a "ready-made" counter, of good material, but rather "loud" in pattern and colors. And his jewelry was too plenty, and much too emphatic for good taste.

Outside of these drawbacks, Plunkett was a fine-looking fellow of probably twenty-eight or thirty years, tall, slender, wiry as a panther.

He, too, was of dark complexion, but where that of White-horse Wheeler was clear red and bronze, the hue of perfect health, that of the other was sallow, with leaden circles about the eyes, and a slight puffiness below each orb which spoke only too plainly of irregular hours and hard drinking at times.

Back of the young man who acted as second in command of the gang of smugglers, showed several rough-clad, rough-faced knaves, all of whom were inspecting the self-styled Edgar Winston with nearly as much interest as that shown by their leader himself.

Plunkett plainly was not altogether pleased with this cool, smiling customer, but he seemed at a loss how to confirm his suspicions, and as the next best thing, gruffly demanded:

"If you're a friend to the family, how comes it I can't place you?"

"Possibly because we never happened to call

at the same hour, I reckon, dear sir," with a slight bow, then adding, more seriously: "But that isn't business, is it? Well, I'll explain."

"I reckon you'd better—if you can!"

"I'll give it a try, anyway, if you'll bridle a wee, pardner. And so—I was riding over this way, this afternoon, when I heard a fellow trying his level best to split his throat wide open! That promised fun of some description, and I picked my way along the windy trail, to find—what do you reckon, pardner?"

"You're saying it—go on!"

"Nothing shorter than two big buck Injuns, with their ropes fast to a poor devil of a white, trying to make their ponies yank him in sections! Well, of course I wasn't going to stay in the brush while they had all the fun to their lonesome, so I chipped, and raked the pot."

"You mean you saved the fellow? Then—where is he now?"

White-horse Wheeler gave a shrug of his shoulder, and cast a smiling glance around the room before replying:

"You tell, for I can't! He came here with me—indeed, he first suggested the notion, for he was afraid the ladies might be offered a dose of the same medicine the red-skins tried to measure out for him! He came here, and he was here when he heard you ride up. He squealed out something about Injuns, and death-trap, and that's the last I heard out of his head. I reckon, though, he must have run off, or crawled up chimney, when I doused the glim."

"Who was he? What was his name? Did he tell you that?"

"Of course, and why not? I saved him from growing a couple of feet longer, all at a jump, you know! Why wouldn't he tell me his name?"

"Then he did tell you—what?"

"Not a very hefty name for a fellow of his size," chuckled White-horse Wheeler, as though amused by the whimsical fancy. "Just an ounce in all, I give you my word, sir!"

"What!" ejaculated Plunkett, sharply. "Not Peleg Ounce?"

Before an answer could be given by the revenue detective, a shot came through the open door, and with a sharp cry, White-horse Wheeler fell heavily to the floor!

CHAPTER XIX.

MAKING A SCAPEGOAT OF PELEG.

At the same instant there came the loud cry: "Look out, boss! It's White-horse Wheeler—no less!"

Milo Plunkett recognized the voice of one of his men in that warning, but before he could take action, so completely had this shot and tumble taken him off his guard, the Revenue Detective leaped to his feet, rising close to the lieutenant, and sending a terribly hard fist in advance of his person.

Stricken squarely under the chin by that blow, the "upper-cut" was powerful enough to lift Plunkett clear of his footing, hurling him back against his fellows, who scattered in confusion, temporarily demoralized by that shot from the rear.

Right and left White-horse Wheeler struck, each blow finding a yielding mark, and then, with a fierce shout, he cleared the threshold, sending the fellow who had given that dastardly shot, reeling aside.

Another leap carried the revenue scout beyond the brief patch of light, and he was lost to sight of the smugglers ere any one of them could rally sufficiently to fire a shot or strike a blow.

"Down him! Don't let him—Fire and furies!" madly spluttered Milo Plunkett, one hand gripping his injured jaw, the other blindly groping for a weapon.

Back from the gloom without came a clear, mocking laugh, followed quickly by a sharp whistle. With a glint of light, Whirligust responded to that signal, and when the young leader rushed forth, only the rapid patter of hoof strokes told him in which direction to empty his pistol.

All this took place with bewildering rapidity, and not one of the little gang had time for a second thought before the daring rider was dashing away through the night.

Half stunned though he was by that swinging stroke, Milo Plunkett was about the first to rally, even though he was foolish enough to waste a round of cartridges on an unseen target.

"Out and scatter!" he cried, hoarsely, himself springing forward as he added: "Maybe 'tis another trick! Hunt him up, then down him—for all time!"

Only a few seconds had been cut to waste, but now that the gang were set in motion, it came to a speedy halt. The sound of hoof-strokes had died away, and there was not the slightest clew to guide their search, save the general direction taken by the fugitive at his start.

"Ef he'd 'a' kep' on that-a-way, we could hear him till yit, boss!" bluntly spoke up one of his fellows, as the young chief paused with head bent in listening. "You knows how hard the s'ile is, down—"

"Spread out and feel for him! If it's really that cursed bloodhound, he mustn't get clear!"

This was easy enough to say, but when it came to executing, quite another matter.

Milo Plunkett was in red-hot earnest, and would have asked no more precious boon than a speedy meeting with the audacious stranger, be he White-horse Wheeler, or simply the man who had knocked him down; but not so the rank and file.

More than one of them was perfectly familiar with the revenue detective's public record, and those who knew less in that direction had seen quite sufficient of the man himself, in his bold escape from their very midst, not to be yearning for a single-handed encounter with him out there in the darkness.

It took but a few minutes to convince even Milo Plunkett that he was on a wild-goose chase, and reluctantly he sounded the recall, moving back toward the house, but coming to a halt while just without the fan of light that streamed through the open door.

"Who fired that shot?" he demanded, craning his neck as he peered into the faces of the knaves who flocked together at his signal. "You, wasn't it, Morris?"

"Me it was, boss, an' ef the durned imp hedn't ketched sight o' my gun jest so pesky quick, I'd 'a'—"

"'Twouldn't 'a' made a bit o' differ', sense ye didn't hev a hunk o' silver to fling," superstitiously muttered another of the gang, at the same time casting an uneasy glance over his shoulder. "Jest plain lead cain't faze him—an' I knows it, too!"

"Nonsense!" sharply reproved their leader. "I know better than that, if only from feeling the villain! And you, Morris, what makes you so sure 'twas that devil?"

"Waal, you see, sir, I was jest sort o' moggin' 'bout out yen' way, mostly to see ef the Filleys hed tuck it afoot or critter-back, when I come chuck-up onto a hoss—his hoss, no less!"

"Whose horse? Talk straight if you know how, man!"

"His hoss—White-hoss's white hoss, ye know; the same critter as give him his name, I reckon, boss!"

"Where? At the stables?"

"No, sir. Hitched out yan' way, 'long of 'nother common critter, fur as I could make out in a hurry. Fer, ye see, boss, when I knowed it was that white hoss, I jest more'n knowed he was that White-hoss, an' so I come hot-foot to warn ye, never thinkin'—"

Milo Plunkett cut in with a vicious oath, his eyes glittering like those of an enraged cat through the gloom. His tightly-clinched hands came up, and it was only through exercising to its utmost his sense of prudence that he could refrain from knocking that glib-tongued block-head down.

"Why didn't you come in and close the door back of you, before letting out the discovery, you—Oh, to think of the chance!"

"An' so I 'lowed to do, boss," hastily lied the rascal, finching a bit from that menacing figure. "An' so I would 'a' did, ef I hedn't see that he saw I knowed who an' what—I jest hed to take a snap-shot, sir, or he'd 'a' plugged me, too mighty quick!"

"I reckon he's pretty nigh right about that, sir," muttered one of the other men, in calmer tones. "If he hadn't smoked mischief, how could he have dodged the flash, so clean?"

"But he said—Didn't he say Peleg was with him?" chipped in a third member, curiously.

Milo Plunkett gave a sudden start at that name, and hurriedly spoke to Morris, in guarded tones:

"You said there was another horse; lead the way there, quick as your feet can carry you, man!"

Naturally anxious to do everything that could help cover his awkward slip of the wasted shot, Morris obeyed, and Plunkett gave vent to a sharp cry as his rush caused the Indian's horse to plunge aside, with an angry snort, revealing a human shape near the tree to which the animal was tied.

"Steady, for I've got you lined!" cried Plunkett, pistols in hand and covering that shrinking figure. "Hands up, at once, or down you go!"

"Don't—it's on'y jest me—jest Peleg Ounce!" came a quivering voice in response.

"You, is it? Circle him, lads! If he tries to make a break, kill him too quick for kicking!"

"I didn't—I don't—Good Lawd!"

"Eyes skinned fer t'other, boss!" cried Morris, as he leaped upon Ounce and bore him to the ground. "I'll fix Peleg, an' don't ye fergit that, nuther! Stiddy, ye—"

"Don't—boss!" squealed the frightened Peleg, but making no sort of struggle against his muscular assailant.

Catching him about the middle, Morris tossed Ounce to his shoulder, then rushed him toward the lighted building, only halting when Plunkett called after him, sharply:

"Steady, Morris! We can settle his case right now and right here, I reckon. So—out with it, Peleg! Why didn't you warn us, your sworn friends and partners, that it was White-horse Wheeler?"

"White-hoss— Good Lawd!" gasped Peleg Ounce, too badly frightened to hit on a plausible lie to save himself.

"Just so: White-horse Wheeler, the detective who has sworn to wipe out all smuggling in these parts! You were in the house with him. You ran away when we came up, and—"

"I tuck ye fer Injuns, boss, shore's shootin'! 'T all come 'bout jest as White-hoss telled ye, fer— Oh, Lawd!"

Peleg broke off abruptly, clapping a hand over his mouth, but the harm was done, and by this awkward slip he had convicted himself beyond recovery.

"That's enough!" harshly said Plunkett, adding, to Morris: "Pick him up again, and run him over yonder. Fetch a trail-rope, quick, some of ye!"

Without paying any heed to the howl of terror which poor Peleg set up, Plunkett strode rapidly away, followed by his men. A halt was made after a short time, at a convenient spot for trial and execution, and, as the ruthless young leader grimly explained:

"Not too near the house, you see! 'T wouldn't be mannerly to leave such nasty fruit hanging right in front of the door, to bother the dear ladies!"

Peleg Ounce was almost too badly frightened to make a defense, even with his tongue, and his broken protestations attracted precious little attention from those who, only a bit ago, were his sworn mates.

Material for a fire was lying handy, and ere long a bright blaze was springing up, by the red glow of which one of the men flung a lasso over the limb of a tree hard by. Another fellow brought up the horse through means of which Peleg had been captured, and Milo Plunkett gave a malicious chuckle as his sharp eyes took note of the Government brand marking the stolen animal; possibly one of the horses captured on the blood-stained Rosebud!

It was the veriest of farces, that pretended arraignment and trial.

Peleg Ounce was commanded to tell his story, but before he had uttered half a dozen sentences, Plunkett hastily interposed, with his version.

"You couldn't tell the truth, even if that would save your neck! This is more like it: You came here with White-horse Wheeler, the man we, as a family, have more to dread than any other man on earth to-day! You knew him, and—"

"Deed I never, boss!" fairly gasped poor Peleg.

"You saw his white stallion, and that told you who and what he was, plainly enough. But I believe you were playing in cahoots with him, selling us all out, else why did you sneak away at our coming?"

"I tuck ye fer Injuns, boss, an' when— Don't!" he gasped, trying to break away as that noose, in obedience to a sign from Plunkett, was cast over his head.

"Stop his jaws, Morris!" harshly ordered the lieutenant, to be promptly obeyed. "Now, men, you have heard enough to shape your judgment. I denounce Peleg Ounce as a traitor to us all, and as such, I ask you what shall be his punishment?"

There was but one response: *Death, by the rope!*

"Good enough! though you couldn't well render any other verdict, according to the facts. Tail on, all!"

Strong hands grasped the slack, and Peleg Ounce was drawn upward!

CHAPTER XX.

BRANDING THE DEAD.

WHILE this was being done, Milo Plunkett stood with his back guarded by a convenient tree-trunk, his right hand holding a revolver ready for a snap-shot, his fiery gaze roving swiftly around.

He more than half expected White-horse Wheeler to chip in when Peleg was being tried and executed, but as nothing of the sort took place before that luckless fellow was hauled, struggling horribly, half a dozen feet from the ground, he harshly ordered his men to tie the slack about a tree-trunk.

While they were doing this, Plunkett wrote in large characters a single word on a leaf from his note-book, mounting the branded horse in order to pin the placard on the breast of the hapless wretch, then leaping to the ground with a short, harsh laugh as he said:

"HORSE-THIEF! That ought to cover the whole case, gentlemen, especially as we'll hitch this beast to the same tree. The U.S. brand will explain itself, I reckon."

No sooner said, than done, and leaving their victim dangling there, the smugglers retraced their steps toward the ranch building.

"Reckon it's ary mo' use lookin' fer White-hoss, boss?" ventured Morris, a little timidly for one of his coarse, reckless nature; but he had never before seen Milo Plunkett in just such a dangerous mood as this, and he feared being called to a stricter account, himself.

"No, I hardly think there is," was the unexpectedly gentle reply. "If he is really White-horse Wheeler, and hadn't cleared out for good,

you can bet high we'd have heard from him just now. Be sure he'd never have let Peleg go up a tree, without chipping in to save or avenge!"

"Holy smokes!" spluttered Morris, aghast at the bare thought. "An' I never so much as thunk o' that!"

Plunkett laughed grimly, then retorted: "Well, you're nothing the worse for it, are you?"

"No, but—jest to think! An' me standin' thar in the plum' light o' everythin', an' him—Durned ef it don't make the teeth o' me go ague-dancin'—it jest do, now!"

"Bite your tongue, then, and keep the whole machinery still. Get to your nags, boys! The quicker this news gets to the chief, the less of a row he'll be apt to kick up in our camp!"

This was another far from agreeable thought, but one and all could see that the lieutenant was in no humor for idle talk, and the knaves hastily obeyed his command. And leaping upon his own horse, Plunkett led the way at a rapid rate toward the Lone Ranch.

It goes without saying that Milo was in anything but an angelic mood, just then. He had hastened to the Filley Ranch, fully expecting to highly commend himself to both Mrs. Filley and Linda—particularly the maiden—by his solicitude for their welfare.

He had missed that point, highly important in his own estimation, for reasons which will be set forth more clearly in good time.

He had stood face to face with the very enemy against whose coming warning had been sent them by trusty agents, and—had let him go, scot-free!

Then, to cap the entire series of ugly events which he would have to explain to Colonel Cougar, he had hung out of hand a sworn member of the family!

That, though, viewed from his standpoint, was the only ameliorative fact in the entire catalogue, providing—

"Ride a bit closer, boys," he said, breaking off his moody reflections at that juncture. "Of course we couldn't do anything else, after the way Peleg played us dirt, but—how do you reckon the colonel will take it?"

There was no response given to that question. The ruffians interchanged uneasy looks, which only too plainly betrayed the fact that this very point had been disturbing their brains, as well.

"As for myself," added Plunkett, after a brief waiting, "I haven't the ghost of a doubt but what Peleg had sold us all out to that devil on a white horse!"

"Looks that way, shore!" ventured Morris. "Ef not, why didn't he holler white when we rid up thar? Eh?"

"That's just what any honest lad would have done, certainly," said the lieutenant, in grim approval. "That's what Peleg would have done, if he hadn't felt too infernally guilty to face us, after selling us out to that bloodhound. Still, maybe the colonel will think we ought to have carried him to the ranch, for his decision."

"Would it make any difference if Ounce had confessed, boss?" ventured another of the party. "Didn't he confess, just before we strung him up?"

Insinuatingly came that query, and quick as thought it was grasped at, by one and all, though Morris was first to blurt out:

"You jest bet he *did*, boss! I kin take my 'davy he fessed the hull thing, from start to git-thar!"

Milo Plunkett broke into a short, harsh, yet pleased laugh.

"I thought you'd remember, gentlemen, and that fact will make it heap sight smoother sailing with the colonel. Only—we've got to stick by each other, and tell the same story, no matter who comes at us with questions, so— How does this fit in?"

"We caught Peleg with White-horse Wheeler. One escaped, thanks to his horse, but we nailed Ounce fast. He admitted having sold us all out to the bloodhound, and in our just indignation, we strung him up a tree!"

The men expressed their approval of this summing up, and one and all swore to stick to that schedule, let come what might.

"All right, then. We know that Peleg was a traitor, but the colonel may kick because we didn't give him a chance to play judge. Now, you button up tight, and don't let a word drop until after I've smoothed it all over with the chief."

A more than ready assent was given to this programme, for not one of those rough fellows would willingly have assumed that ugly task.

Pressing on in hot haste, the Lone Ranch was reached, and leaving his animal to be looked after by the men, Milo Plunkett at once hastened into the presence of Colonel Cougar, who was sitting alone in the room adjoining that through the floor of which he had, some time before, dropped Anderson Filley, as the easiest method of saving his own life.

This, be it remembered, was before the double surprise which came to Colonel Cougar, in the message brought by Jack Broome, concerning the capture of Maurice Filley, and the finding of

the dead cougar, with the rancher lying by its side, seemingly just as surely slain.

"Well, you've brought the ladies?" eagerly demanded the colonel, springing to his feet, with a look beyond his lieutenant, as though expecting still more welcome faces. "Where are they, Plunkett?"

"I'm sorry to report that I don't know, sir," said Milo, hastily adding as he saw that rising storm: "The ranch was deserted, so far as the ladies were concerned, but from the looks of things, I hardly think they've come to any harm."

"Why didn't you hunt them up, then? Why didn't you—"

"Because something happened that I thought you ought to know without delay, colonel! We found two men at the ranch. One was Peleg Ounce, but the other—well, he knocked me endways, upset half the boys, and was out in the dark before we could tell what sort of a cyclone had struck us!"

"What! you don't mean to say— Who was he?"

"We twisted that information out of Peleg Ounce, colonel, after a mighty tough bit of arguing. And—I hate to say it, boss!"

"Out with it, curse you!" angrily snarled the chief, his own face turning a bit paler, keeping company with that of his next in command. "You say Peleg told you—just what?"

"That the fellow who got off was White-horse Wheeler."

Milo Plunkett had nerved himself to dodge a shot or ward off a blow, but, to his intense relief, neither was offered him. Instead of bursting into furious rage at this truly startling information, Colonel Cougar staggered back, sinking into the chair from which he had risen at the coming of his lieutenant, a ghastly pallor coming into his usually florid countenance.

His muscular frame shivered as with an ague fit, but it was more through speechless rage and disappointment than from physical fear, as Plunkett was keen enough to divine.

"That devil!" gasped the colonel, hoarsely. "Here—got away!"

"It nearly chokes me to say it, colonel, but—I couldn't lie to you about it. And if Peleg had only—"

"Hal! Peleg? You said—was he with that devil, then?"

"He surely was, colonel, as my lads can bear witness if you see fit to call and question them. And—if Peleg hadn't answered for them both when I bailed the house, we'd surely have caught Wheeler. But, as we knew Ounce, and thought him white, we never once dreamed of anything being wrong until the rush came, just as we dismounted."

"He did that? Peleg Ounce?"

"He just did, sir! And only for his treachery—"

"Why didn't you kill the devil? Why didn't you—with that detective, and playing in cahoots? Why didn't you kill him, I say, man alive?"

"Would you have upheld us in going so far, colonel?" asked Plunkett, still thinking it best to feel his way. "If we had forced Peleg to admit that he had actually formed an alliance with White-horse Wheeler, we would have been justified in running the traitor up a tree, without wasting time in fetching the villain to you for judgment?"

"You'd be an infernal idiot if you didn't!"

"I'm glad to hear you say it, colonel."

And Plunkett broke into a low chuckle of intense relief at having gained his point so readily.

"We did make Peleg confess, fully and entirely. And then—we were so infernally hot over his treachery that we just sent him up a tree forthwith!"

"You hung him?"

"We hung him, colonel. How could we help it? And then, too, we covered our tracks right neatly."

Plunkett, without waiting to give his superior officer a chance to break forth, for or against his actions, rapidly described the hanging, mentioning the placard pinned to the body and the branded army horse hitched close by.

"If any one finds his carcass before we put it out of sight—"

"Let him hang there until he rots, the treacherous whelp!"

"With all my heart, sir," chuckled Plunkett. "Now, having reported to you, as in duty bound, sha'n't I take a few men and go search for White-horse Wheeler? So long as he runs at large in these parts, just so long will we be in deadly danger; you know that, colonel!"

Before Colonel Cougar could make reply there came a signal from the front of the ranch, and, recognizing it as one he had been expecting for some little time, Cruger said:

"It's Jack Broome, in from the crossing. Go send him in, and those with him, if he is not alone. I'll see you after he reports."

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK.

COLONEL COUGAR was correct in his belief that the new-comer was Jack Broome, the signal-man, though he little anticipated the impor-

tant tidings that worthy knave had to communicate.

As already detailed, that report was made, Broome was sent back to hurry the coming of Maurice Filley, and, for the moment forgetting all else in his vicious longing to torment his captive, Colonel Cougar sought the prison cell of Anderson Filley, with the result made known.

After lending the aid called for by his chief, Milo Plunkett obeyed when bidden to leave the room, but he hung uneasily near, and even contrived to catch an inkling of the matter under discussion, through the closed door.

For some reason or other he was intensely interested in the affair, but he was cunning enough not to be caught playing the eaves-dropper, and he took warning of those sounds without, even before, keen-eared Colonel Cougar distinguished the signal which betokened the coming of Jack Broome and the younger Filley.

Anderson Filley turned heart-sick and faint of body at those fiercely exultant words, even though he failed to catch their whole meaning.

"My boy! He hasn't—you never—"

"Your boy is coming—what there is left of him, I should say!" pitilessly repeated the arch-villain, leaving his seat and crossing over to the door. "Guess for yourself how it came so, dear daddy-in-law, but I'm telling you Gospel truth; some of my lads picked Maurice up out of the river, and are toting him here. For what purpose, I leave you to study out."

Without waiting for more, Colonel Cougar slipped out of the room, fastening the door behind him, paying no heed to the choking cry which burst from the tortured rancher.

Milo Plunkett had noiselessly stolen out of eye-range, and was found by Colonel Cougar, dutifully receiving the three smugglers with their captive.

At a sign from their chief, the knaves brought the youngster out of the darkness to the room where Colonel Cougar beat a retreat, his gravely composed countenance betraying naught of the unholy joy which bubbled up in his bosom.

At a sign from him, the bandage was removed from the eyes of the lad, and after a blinking glance around the room, Maurice let his gaze rest upon that florid visage a moment before boldly demanding:

"Is it by your orders that I'm treated so shamefully, sir? Are you responsible for this dirty outrage, Colonel Cruger?"

"These gentlemen are my sworn deputies, young fellow, and they had every reason in the world to think you were engaged in smuggling, when they bounced you, as in duty bound. Now, you were smuggling, of course?"

The flush of indignation scorched the cheeks of the prisoner, but he managed to choke back the hot retort which fought for utterance. He more than suspected the nature of the trap being set for him, and if only to annoy his enemies, he would not assist in springing it.

"I deny that I have been guilty of anything wrong or unlawful, Colonel Cruger, while these cowardly whelps— Do you uphold them in this, sir?"

"They claim they had good reason for thinking you were trying to run the lines with— You are not a smuggler, then, Filley?"

"I am not, and the fellow who even hints that way is a lying cur!"

Despite his resolutions to the contrary, youthful blood is hot, and Maurice could not wholly command his temper.

"A young cock crows mighty loud, seems to me," chuckled Cruger, as he nodded to Sabe Wolfert, and whispered a few words into his ear, which sent the old hunter into the chamber where Anderson Filley was confined, as guard. "Sounds very much like the old bird, too! Well, Maurice, it cut me through the very quick to hear evil reports against you: a lad for whom I've long held a strong liking."

"Begging pardon, sir, but—do you claim to be an officer of the law for these parts?"

"Well, I'm not so— What do you mean, boy?"

"That I demand a fair show, and as the first step in that direction, take me to the proper authorities, and let these curs charge me with smuggling, if they dare!"

"Maybe you'd bring a counter-charge against them, to play even? Is that it, boy?" purringly asked the colonel, keenly watching the face of his prisoner.

But the trap was too bald, and Maurice foiled it.

"No, sir. I am not a smuggler, and stand ready to prove it, if any one dares try to back up such a silly charge. But neither do I bring such a charge against any person, because— Oh, sir!" his forced composure giving way at last, his voice growing tremulous, his defiant eyes dimming with unshed tears.

"What is it, Filley?" Colonel Cougar quickly asked, before the lad could command his voice again. "There hasn't—nothing has gone wrong with your people, I'm hoping!"

Better for his hopes, perhaps, had Cruger been less eager to chip in. Maurice was strongly agitated as he thought of that family, but his former suspicions concerning this man were

only strengthened as he took note of that eager glow in his evil eyes.

Instead of replying, the lad locked his lips, and as he saw this, Colonel Cougar bit his own sharply. He began to realize his mistake, but the harm was done, and he could only attempt to smooth it over.

"You're foolish, Filley, to let a mistake, so easily explained as this one is, sour you against those who are more than willing to lend both you and yours a helping hand; and for that—"

"Speaking of hands, Colonel Cougar, take a squint at mine!"

As he spoke, Maurice turned about, the better to call attention to the bonds which still confined both wrists and elbows.

Cruger scowled blackly, but then drew a knife and cut the cords, as the easiest and shortest way out of the matter.

"Thank you, for so much," coolly said Maurice, with a curt nod at the Lone Ranch owner, as Colonel Cougar resumed his former position. "It's something to have the use of a fellow's hands, even if he is held a prisoner without law or reason!"

A little to his own surprise and disgust, Cruger found himself far less at ease with this lad than he had been while dealing with his father. Somehow the right words proved wrong, and each time he tried to find a neat opening he ran up against a blank wall.

Time was passing, and much remained to be done before he could feel at liberty to rest. And so, casting aside all preliminaries, he asked:

"What have you done with your women folk, boy? Don't you know that the country is being fairly overrun with red-skins?"

"All the more reason why you'd ought to set me free to look after their safety, Colonel Cruger!" sharply retorted Maurice.

"It's only a flurry, of course, and can't last long. I dare say we will hear bugles calling before another sunset. Still, it'll be nasty work while it lasts, and Heaven have pity on the women who fall into their grip! They'd far better never have been born at all!"

Didn't Maurice know that? Ah, yes! 'Twas the main torment he had been suffering ever since falling into the clutches of these knaves, and to avert the possibility of that capture, he had humbled himself to beg and plead with his captors.

He could not stoop so low with this red-faced tyrant, though! Only for him, nothing of this bitter trouble would have arisen.

Only for him and his crimes, that disastrous trip would never have been undertaken that day, and Anderson Filley would not have—

A half-smothered groan told the rest: he could not shape it, even in his own mind.

Smothered though it was, Colonel Cougar heard that sound, and put his own interpretation upon it.

Believing the lad was weakening, he hastily pressed the point he most wished to make before fairly letting the mask fall.

"'T would be horrible, Filley, and you're plenty old enough to realize as much. This may be only a passing raid—I sincerely trust it may prove such—but while it lasts, there's only one place of safety for your women folk, and that is here at the Lone Ranch! Now, once more, boy: where have you hidden your mother and sister?"

"How do you know I've hidden them at all?" sharply asked Maurice.

"Because they're not at home. I feared for their safety, and sent Plunkett there to escort them to this place. He found the house shut up and deserted. He came back to report, and just then you were brought in by these men. So I say: where have you hidden them?"

"Where they will remain until my return, sir. You have no right to keep me here longer. Will you let me go peaceably, or must I fight for a passage?"

The brawny knaves grinned broadly, and even Cruger was forced to smile at that speech; it sounded so oddly, under the circumstances.

"Pray don't eat us all up, Filley!" the colonel sneered, then again harked back: "Where is your sister, boy? Tell me that, and you can go free as the winds that blow."

"It's none of your business where she is, sir!"

"Come, come, don't be all an idiot, Maurice! I only ask because I want to guard her—and her mother—against worse than death."

After all, Maurice was but a boy, with a boyish temper and rashness. Knowing as he did how thoroughly vile this pretended benefactor was, how could he stand quietly by while those evil lips repeated the name of his loved sister?

"You?" he cried, his face very pale, but his voice ringing with bitter scorn as he boldly met that glowing gaze. "You save her, my innocent sister, my dear mother?"

"I surely will, if you only give me the chance, Maurice."

"You? Why, you villain! they'd rather trust to the mercy of the bloodiest Sioux buck that ever scalped a baby, than risk themselves in your hands!"

"Steady, boy!" muttered Milo Plunkett in

grim warning. "Can't you see how surely you're cutting your own throat?"

"Button, you!" growled Cougar, with a venomous glance toward his lieutenant. "And you, Filley, ought to go kick yourself for showing such fool prejudice against a gentleman who has so lately risked his own life in order to save that of your father."

For a single breath the youngster stood staring at the speaker, seemingly spellbound, but then, as he caught the full meaning of those words, a wild, piercing cry burst from his lungs.

That cry penetrated to the closed room in which Anderson Filley was under guard, and recognizing the voice, he shouted, madly:

"My boy! Devils! Give me my boy, or—"

There came the sounds of a furious struggle beyond the closed door, and giving a fierce shout of vengeance, Maurice sprung at the throat of Colonel Cougar.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE COUGAR SHOWS HIS TEETH.

DARKE CRUGER had turned partially toward that closed room as he sprung to his feet, and thus was taken entirely off his guard by the fierce attack which was made upon him by Maurice Filley.

It was fortunate for the smuggler chief that the youngster had been disarmed by his captors, else he might never have known how vengeance actually overtook him. As it was, the maddened boy gripped his throat with both hands, winding his legs about those of his enemy, and only the prompt action of Milo Plunkett saved the chief from a humiliating downfall.

With a savage wrench and twist, the lieutenant tore Maurice away, and held him helpless while Cruger, raging like a madman, flung himself headlong against the door, bursting it open and tripping over the two forms which seemed but as one, so tightly were guard and prisoner locked together in a death-grapple.

Left to himself, Anderson Filley would surely have slain the old hunter, but strong bands fastened upon them, and they were torn apart. None too soon for Sabe Wolfert; he required assistance in regaining his feet, and fearing a shot as soon as the vindictive fellow could rally sufficiently to handle a weapon, Milo Plunkett called forth:

"Run him outside, Westgate! Get him out of the way, I say!"

While this was being done, and Maurice Filley being once more put into bonds, Colonel Cougar found little difficulty in overcoming the rancher, thanks to the tough tussle old Sabe had given him before interference came.

"Harm them not!" he cried, sharply; more for those who had taken Maurice in charge than on account of his own prisoner, however. "They are worth their weight in gold to me, just now! Hold fast, but do no harm, or I'll call on ye to settle with me!"

For a brief space it was an exciting scene, but number triumphed over bravery, and ere long father and son were brought into the same room, together, yet apart.

"Thank God for His mercies!" panted Filley, his eyes filling with tears of joy as he recognized the son whom he had mourned as lost. "You are alive, and—your mission, son?"

Colonel Cougar was listening breathlessly, hoping to gain the information he valued so highly, but Maurice caught a glimpse of that eager face, and his reply was guarded accordingly.

"Fulfilled, father," he said, simply.

Colonel Cougar choked back an oath, and Filley gave a long breath of relief. Although matters were bad enough, still this was a gleam of brightness which he could fully appreciate.

"Don't say anything more, now, Maurice, for—"

"Then button your own lips, curse you!" snarled Colonel Cougar, striking the rancher a wicked blow, with open palm, across the mouth.

"You dirty whelp!" indignantly cried Maurice, his eyes fairly blazing with hatred as he witnessed that cowardly blow. "I'll kill you for that, if it costs me my own life!"

"Your own life?" echoed Cruger, fiercely. "Why, you little idiot, you own none! Your life is mine, to give or to take away, just as my sweet will dictates! And if I don't make that life one prolonged torment to you both, then I'm 'way off my base!"

"Steady, son!" warningly spoke his father.

"Don't let him taunt you into telling—"

Again a vicious stroke cut his speech short, but Filley was content with what he had done. A true chip of the old block, Maurice was on his guard, and would be true to his trust, even unto death.

Colonel Cougar was not so mad but that he could reason so far, and turning toward the men who stood by in quiet curiosity, he bade them leave that room, for the present.

"If I require help, I'll call, so keep on the alert," he added, at the same time checking Milo Plunkett with a sharp nod. "You can

stay, for that'll only make it even—stephen with us all."

The men left the room, and Plunkett quietly closed the door behind them. He was anxious to resume his interrupted work, for reasons which he held sufficient, yet he was perfectly willing to remain throughout the scene which he instinctively felt was coming on.

If Colonel Cougar succeeded in breaking down the will of either father or son, and gained from them a knowledge of the place of hiding to which Mrs. Filley and Linda had betaken themselves, he wanted to share that knowledge at the earliest possible moment.

"The boy knows where they're hidden, sir," he muttered, in a guarded whisper. "Force him to tell, or—the red-skins may gobble 'em up!"

Colonel Cougar replied only with a scowl, and Plunkett fell back, meekly accepting that look as a hint to mind his own business.

Both father and son had their arms firmly bound behind them, so there was little risk of their being troublesome on the score of resisting insult or torture by physical force.

The width of the room separated them, and, though their feet were free, neither one tried to move nearer together just then.

Colonel Cougar gazed keenly, first at one face, then upon the other. He seemed studying how to begin his attack, but he surely found little in either face to encourage him.

That fact possibly rendered him more reckless than he might have been under more favorable circumstances, for when he did speak, it was with rude directness:

"Look here, my fine fellows! I've given each one of you a chance to fall easily, but you wouldn't have it. Now—I'm going to give you words with the bark on!"

"I'd a heap sight rather play friends with you, but since that is not to your liking, we'll try what main force will do. You, boy, have hidden your mother and sister away. I want them here, to make the family reunion complete. Will you tell me just where they are?"

Maurice made no reply, but his firmly-set jaws answered plainly enough: he would never give up that information!

Colonel Cougar readily interpreted that resolution, and his lips curled back until a gleam of his strong teeth showed through his mustaches. Then he spoke:

"You refuse? All right! I'll force the information from your lips, or make you suffer a dozen deaths in your obstinacy!"

He turned toward Anderson Filley and addressed him directly:

"If you have any love for your son, Filley, bid him speak out. If you don't, and he holds stubborn, I'll make you both wish he had never been born!"

"Hold your tongue, boy!" grimly muttered the rancher.

"I'll bite it off and swallow it first, father!" boldly cried the youngster, looking just as though he meant what he said, too.

Milo Plunkett scowled anxiously, knowing the terrible temper of his chief as he did. But for once he was mistaken.

Though Colonel Cougar turned ghastly yellow with rage, it was a white heat, and when he spoke his tones were low and even, almost gentle:

"You both say, no, but I say, yes! I swear, by heaven and by hell, that he shall tell, or never again see the light of day! And as for you, Anderson Filley—listen!"

"You went far out of your way to work me and mine injury. We never troubled you, never did you one hand's-turn of harm. We simply turned wrong into right, and, while fooling the tyrants, put a bit of honest money into our own pockets."

"You saw fit to play the cowardly spy upon us and our actions. You marked us all down as victims, and while you were riding to set the devilish hounds of an unholy law upon our backs, we saved you from being butchered by the red-skins."

"Now, you've branded us all as smugglers. We are just that. I'm not ashamed of my trade. It's plenty good enough for me, and—it's got to be good enough for you!"

He paused with that, as though expecting an answer or retort of some description, but none came. Father and son were silent. They were helpless to do more than wait, but neither face betrayed sign of fear or of faltering in the slightest degree.

Milo Plunkett seemed far more uneasy, and plainly felt that his chief was going entirely too far in his plain talk; but even he was not bold enough to openly object to those dangerous admissions.

"Do you know just what that means?" continued Colonel Cougar, after a brief silence. "It means that you both, father and son, shall be my band of smugglers, and become precisely guilty as you now deem us! It means that I shall become one of the family, to share our ups and our defeats. If we suffer from the detectives you have set on our track, you shall help pay the penalty!"

"You think I can't fetch all this about? That proves you don't even begin to know the man

you've undertaken to hunt down to a prison cell! I can and will do precisely what I'm telling you—and more!"

"I've already let a hint or two drop as to why I'm so anxious to have your women-folk join you here. I'll tell you now, even more plainly, that I love Linda Filley, and fully intend that she shall become my lawful wife, or she'll never again see her father or her brother!"

"Kill us both, then, out of hand, you devil!" sternly cried Anderson Filley. "Butcher us, I say, for that foul hope shall never come true!"

"I'd sooner see her dead, a thousand times over!" cried Maurice, his face flushing with mingled rage and hatred.

Colonel Cougar glanced from father to son, as they hurled defiance at him and his threats, but he merely laughed in cruel malice as he finished speaking.

"Kill you? Butcher you?" he echoed, sneeringly. "No, no, my sweet-tempered friends! I know a trick worth two of that, but still my vow stands: neither of you shall catch a glimpse of daylight until you have knuckled down, and the dainty Linda is a wife—my wife!"

Colonel Cougar stepped to the hidden trap-door, swinging it open, then drawing back a pace or two, to add:

"As the first step, you are going below. You know the drop is not great enough to break neck or limb, Filley. Will you take it of your own accord, or must we pitch you down, neck and heels?"

It was a severe test, but the rancher knew how helpless they were just then, with arms bound behind them. If alone, he might have offered resistance, but he had his son to consider, and after a brief struggle with himself, he said to Maurice:

"Go first, my boy. We can't fight these devils, and we'll not give them an excuse for piling up the abuse. Sit on the edge, then jump down. I'll follow after you."

Without a word in opposition, Maurice obeyed. He stepped to the edge of the trap, cast one brief glance through the opening, then leaped boldly to the stone floor.

Anderson Filley instantly followed, and Colonel Cougar cried out:

"If you grow hungry, eat the cat, my dear friends! If thirsty, suck his blood, for nothing better shall pass your lips until you yield to all I ask!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

CHEATING THE ROPE.

MORE than once since becoming a detective by profession, White-horse Wheeler had found cause for congratulating himself on his keen eye and ready wit, but never did they serve him better than on the night in question.

Peter Morris had spoken truly enough, so far as his discovery of the famous white stallion was concerned, and his consequent deductions as to who the cool stranger in parley with Milo Plunkett must be; but when he declared that he shot only to save his own life, he strayed outside the boundary lines of truth.

As mentioned, White-horse Wheeler, before lighting the oil lamp, took up his position facing the front door, and he had not materially altered that position when he caught a glimpse of a man just without the opening, lifting a rifle to a level with his own head.

There could be but one meaning attached to that movement, and acting on pure instinct, the revenue detective dropped to the floor, just in the nick of time. He felt the lead snap his hat-crown, and knew that he had escaped death by little more than an inch!

No sooner down than he was up, clearing the way with his fists, for lack of more deadly weapons, and leaving the smugglers in a wild tumult, he darted away under cover of the night-shadows.

A single brief call brought gallant Whirlygust to meet him, and springing into the saddle, White-horse Wheeler bent low along the stallion's neck, anticipating what quickly followed: wild firing.

He sent back a bit of mockery, for the lead sped wide, and that was a cheap method of getting even with his enemies for driving him off the field.

"Who was it?" he asked himself, giving Whirlygust the sign to run easily, at the same time veering sharply to the right. "Would he do that, after I saved him from the reds?"

Naturally enough his first suspicions had turned toward Peleg Ounce, who had vanished so suddenly, just when his presence might have been of service by way of guarantee; but even so soon he began to doubt the truth of those suspicions.

"'Twas but a glimpse I caught, and that too imperfect to swear by, but—if the rascal wasn't heap sight bigger than Peleg, then he's the solidest, heaviest ounce I ever met up with."

Treading like a cat, hardly a sound came to betray that change of course, and this was the reason why the smugglers were so quickly at fault. And then, reining in and facing the line which he had at first laid in his flight, White-horse Wheeler waited, pistols in hand, for the fierce pursuit which he looked for as a matter of course.

Those few moments of swift racing had carried him beyond ear-shot of the Filley Ranch, and the scattered trees which intervened had shut off his eyesight before he covered one-half that distance. All he could do was to wait and listen, keeping his eyes open for later use.

After Milo Plunkett emptied his six-shooter in the first flurry of rage, not a shot had been discharged, and not a yell or an order could White-horse Wheeler detect, listen how he might.

"What sort of trick are they trying to come over a fellow?" the revenue scout asked himself, with a sensation of growing uneasiness.

An open rush, a death-meant storm of bullets, he could have met with a reckless laugh, but this strange silence was far more difficult to bear, because so foreign to the nature of these knaves.

To baffle whatever cunning snare might be preparing, White-horse Wheeler rode still further away, at the same time circling partly around the Filley Ranch before coming to a pause once more.

"Trick for trick, and we'll see who rakes it in!" he muttered, slipping out of the saddle beneath an overshadowing tree. "Stay here, Whirlygust, until I call you, old lad!"

He paused for a caressing touch of that velvet muzzle, giving back a loving stroke in return, then slowly, silently crept away through the darkness, heading for the rear of the house.

Firm in his belief that, even if a trap of some sort was not being laid for his discomfiture, Milo Plunkett and his gang of ruffians meant no good to Mrs. Filley or Linda, Wheeler resolved to run no extra risks until he solved those suspicions, for or against.

Thanks to the caution which he displayed, making sure of each step before taking it, some little time crept by before he came into fair view of the ranch proper; and then the gang was some little distance away, dooming Peleg Ounce to death by the rope as a traitor.

Finding all silent at and around the house, although the lamplight still shone through the open doorway, White-horse Wheeler noiselessly crept around far enough to steal a glance into the room from which he had escaped so neatly.

Still he could neither see nor hear aught of the gang, and, gliding back to less open quarters, he cast a slow, searching gaze around, to give a little start as he noted a faint glow reflecting on a bushy tree-top some considerable distance away.

He knew there were no outbuildings in that direction, and nothing to cause a fire unless it had been purposely kindled since his hurried leave-taking.

"What does it mean! A trick to trap the old man? Well, trickery goes, gentlemen!"

Gliding silently away through the gloom, keeping carefully out of such patches of moonlight as lay in the path he had chosen, White-horse Wheeler maneuvered so as to steal closer to that lighted point from the direction in which his coming would be least looked for.

And then, to his stern horror, he caught sight of poor Peleg Ounce dangling at the end of a rope, with that damning label pinned to his bosom!

Instantly his pistols came out and pointed in that direction; but before he could clear the twigs of the bush behind which he had crept to a point of view, Milo Plunkett made the move which denoted a speedy departure from the scene of execution.

A cool, keen brain works with marvelous rapidity at times, and White-horse Wheeler held his fire, for the time being, at least.

"If they just pulled him up, he can't be dead yet. He'd stand that sort of choking for a solid quarter of an hour, yet have life enough left for pulling through, rightly helped. But—if I fire, they'll keep me too busy for lending him a hand, even if they don't drive me off the ground entirely. So—Skin out, ye dirty whelps!"

Scarcely had Milo Plunkett turned his face toward the Filley Ranch once more, than White-horse Wheeler was crawling nearer that ghastly figure hanging in the bright light of the fire. And almost before the last one of the evil gang was out of sight, the revenue scout was casting his keen-edged knife at the taut rope above poor Peleg's head.

That one dextrous cast was sufficient. Tough though the trail-rope was, cut and weight combined proved too much for it, and Wheeler caught the limp, seemingly lifeless form in his strong arms, saving it from a sudden and risky shock.

Quickly recovering his balance, the detective bore Peleg away from the scene of his execution, not daring to linger in the light for an examination into his condition, lest the enemy return, to ruin all.

"Well, you're cheating the rope, old fellow, even at the very worst!" grimly murmured White-horse, as he left the red fire-glow for the safer darkness.

He did not retreat as far as Whirlygust, knowing as he did that a single call would quickly fetch that faithful comrade to his side. He could not expect to make a perfectly silent retreat while bearing such a limply awkward burden, and so he came to a halt when a few

rods away from the fire, gently lowering Peleg to the ground, listening, as he unburdened himself, for some sound from the enemy.

It came to him, almost immediately, in the shape of rapid hoof-strokes, and naturally supposing that they would come by, for a last gloating look at their victim, White-horse Wheeler drew a pistol, meaning to give them scare sufficient to enable him to escape with Ounce, on the back of good Whirlygust.

But the expected did not happen, in this case, and as the hoof-strokes died away in the distance, White-horse Wheeler began his examination of the hapless fellow whose particular bane appeared to be the rope.

"Three times and out, pardner!" muttered the detective, as his light touch distinctly felt a fluttering heart-beat. "You've cheated the rope twice in one day; don't do it again, or—keep away from the water!"

As though he caught that grim warning, Peleg Ounce gave a gurgling gasp, seemingly attempting to speak. He shivered violently, drawing up his legs and contracting his arms, but when Wheeler asked him how he reckoned he was feeling, the poor fellow merely moaned, then lay more quiet.

By this time the scout had satisfied himself that Peleg had suffered no other harm, and knowing that peace and quiet would do more than anything else he could offer, he squatted down near by, waiting with what patience he could summon.

Not but that he had ample food for thought; that was the trouble, he had entirely too much of that staple!

What was the actual explanation of that deserted ranch?

Could Anderson Filley have escaped the Indians, and, making all haste home, have removed his family? If so, whither had he taken them?

Surely not to the Lone Ranch? If so, would not that be leaping out of the fryingpan into the fire?

He could not make it clear that the rancher had escaped with life, after the last glimpse he had caught of him, struggling with a vicious mustang, while a swarm of red devils were racing for his scalp.

He thought of Maurice, whom he had not seen as one of the fugitives, be it remembered. Had he taken alarm, and so removed the women? If so, whither?

Then, too, if Maurice had taken them away, would he not have left some word or sign to guide his father on his return?

"Surely, yes! But—how if Colonel Cougar took a hand in? How if he—but, again, there's Plunkett, just now!"

It was a perplexing affair, take it how he might, but White-horse Wheeler would have reached a decision far sooner, only for one fact: it was man, *versus* detective.

Although he had never even heard of Linda Filley two months before this night, Walter Wheeler had tumbled over head and ears with the little lady, and her possible peril just now clouded his usually keen and shrewd judgment.

He knew that, as a sworn officer of the law, he ought to be following up the clew let fall by Peleg Ounce in his fright at recognizing the voice of "the young boss," otherwise Milo Plunkett: but if he should take up that trail, how could he earn what had become of Linda?

Suddenly Peleg gave a start, wildly gasping: "Run—they're comin'—to kill!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

PELEG FINDS HIS TONGUE.

THE violent start which White-horse Wheeler gave at this sudden outburst, proved how completely he was off his guard, and even in that moment of excited expectation, he felt a flush of shame that such should be the fact.

Peleg tried to spring to his feet in his terror, but as yet was in poor condition for a foot-race with death, and supporting his falling form with one arm, White-horse Wheeler clapped a broad palm over his lips, hastily uttering the warning:

"Hist, old fellow! I'll do the fighting for us both, if any's needed just now. You're not—What did you hear?"

He partially removed his hand, but Peleg made no immediate reply, shivering like a leaf in that friendly grasp, trying to make out the face above him. Then he huskily gasped:

"You, boss? Don't let 'em—don't hang!"

"Never a bit of it, Peleg," distinctly spoke the detective, his first fears set at rest, knowing now that it was but a haunting memory of those horrible moments while he was being brutally dragged from his feet by the closing, suffocating noose. "I saved you from hanging. The rascals have gone, thinking you dead and past telling about them. You are worth a score of dead men, old fellow!"

"They didn't—I never had a show!"

"They treated you worse than I'd treat a sheep-killing cur, Peleg, and that's a scandalous fact! But you're all hunky, now, and if you don't play even with Milo Plunkett and his cut-throats, then I'll always think you'd ought to!"

White-horse Wheeler was all detective, now, and had put aside all other thoughts for the present. He was burning to question Ounce about this gang, but hardly dared open fire all at once.

"Little by little!" was his wise reflection. "Get him used to the notion, before he fairly rallies, and the trick will turn all the more easy when I come to deal the cards!"

For a full minute the rescued man remained silent, supported by those strong arms, but then he gave vent to an oath: full of intense hatred toward the being at whose head it was aimed.

White-horse Wheeler believed his time was ripe, sooner than he had dared hope, and as he lowered Peleg to a sitting position, squatting before him, holding fast to both tremulous hands, he spoke sternly:

"Curse them later, old man, but, *talk now!* They treated you like a dog. They strung you up, without time to plead or to pray, and—"

"They did! He did—hell blast him forever!"

"Milo Plunkett, of course?" asked Wheeler, giving those hands another friendly grip as he added: "I know it, though I was too late to hinder the hanging. I cut you down, and risked my own life in carrying you here, to a place of safety. Now, Peleg, don't you reckon, I deserve to be treated white, on *your* part?"

Again there was a brief pause, during which Ounce hung his head, as though in deep reflection.

The detective waited, choking back his impatience as only a strong man can. He felt almost sure of winning his point, but with so much at stake, he could not rest easy until the last doubt was cleared away.

Fortunately he was not held much longer in suspense, for Peleg drew a long breath, as he lifted his face, to ask:

"Ef a man is hung—clean up an' down hung! Ef he's *that*, boss, hain't it jest the same as ef he'd tuck up a new life?"

The point was clumsily put, but Peleg was hardly himself yet, and White-horse Wheeler caught at the hint, gladly enough.

"Of course it is, pardner! And being hung, old Peleg is dead, taking with him all the oaths and pledges he may have given those who, by hanging him, have proved themselves deadly enemies to the *new* Peleg. And so, New Peleg, out with it!"

"You mean?" faltered Ounce, still hanging in the wind a bit.

"I mean that you said just enough when those rascals came down on us, to need to say more now! You let part of the truth escape, Peleg, and since Plunkett treated you so low-down, you're worse than no man at all if you don't play to get even with him, and the whole gang!"

"I'll do it—cuss an' double cuss him all over! An' *them*, too! Never a one but what jest etched to pull the rope! An' *them*—boss?"

"All right, Peleg: you mean they are part of the smuggling gang?"

"Ef I do tell, you'll stand to my back, boss?"

"I'll stand in front of you, Peleg, and that's heap sight safer for you," grimly chuckled the revenue scout. "Don't force me to go back and report that you were the only smuggler I could catch, old man!"

"Ef you'll rake 'em all in, boss!"

"That's precisely what I'm up here for, Peleg, and with your help, from under cover if you like it best, I'll make a clean haul. Now—get down to business, pardner! The gang is—who and what?"

"Plunkett is one of 'em—one o' the *wu'st* of 'em, put it, boss!"

"I've got Plunkett down, Peleg. But he isn't the actual chief, you know. That is—Colonel Cougar, for a rude guess!"

"Don't—talk lower, boss!" shiveringly gasped the frightened man. "Ef he should ketch a word sech as *them*—an' somehow he's got ears that kin ketch a critter's thoughts!"

"Has an army of spooks to carry him news, eh?" the detective laughed, softly. "Well, Peleg, I'm a bit of a medium myself, and agree to lay out all the spooks the colonel sends our way. So—go on, pardner!"

This light, chaffing manner seemed to hearten Ounce up, and in low but clear whispers, he proceeded to tell all he knew concerning the smugglers and their secrets. That was pretty much all, for Peleg, though anything but a hero in some things, had proved himself a serviceable member of that identical gang.

"Kunnel Cougar is the head boss," he admitted, frankly enough, even while casting a half-superstitious glance over his shoulder the while. "He got up the gang, an' he's the one that lays out all the tricks an' schemes an' sech-like."

"Plunkett backs him up, of course?"

"Sure! He's the next to the boss, an' he does most of the fancy work. The kunnel stays at home, mostly, or in makin' b'lieve at his mills an' lumber-camps."

"Doing the respectable, between spells. I understand. That's just the sort I figured him out as being. Well, go on; where do they stow their goods, while waiting for a market?"

"They's many a hundred pound o' opium gone down to a market when the log-drivin' is

on," said Ounce, with a subdued chuckle. "Put up in tight tin cans, ye understand, an' sent 'long the drive, inside o' marked logs."

"The deuce you say!" ejaculated the amazed detective. "I never once thought of a trick like *that*!"

"You won't git hot under the collar ef I tell ye *who* hatched the trick up, fu'st-off, boss?" hesitated Peleg.

"You, was it? Well, you're even smarter than I took you for, and that is needless!" declared Wheeler, thinking a bit of soft-soaping would not come amiss just there.

It served its purpose, and Peleg resumed with greater ease:

"As fer the goods, that cain't well go through in sech a way, the finer lots is tuck to the Lone Ranch, nights, an' hid in the pit."

"What sort of place is that, Peleg?"

"Kind of a stoned-up sular, boss. Thar's three of 'em all in a row. One is jest under the ranch itself, an' you'd take it for a common sular, ef you didn't stop to count how mighty smooth an' strong an' snug she's built."

"J'inin' on to this, ye know, comes the fu'st o' the three pits like I sot out to tell ye of. That fu'st one is a stone sular, like all the rest, an' thar's a door opens into it, from the sular under the house."

"Through which the goods are packed away, of course. But—the door is a secret one, of course? If not, and the ranch should be searched on suspicion, that door would be a dead give-

Peleg was grimly chuckling to himself all through this speech, but when an opening offered, he promptly improved it:

"Ef a body what didn't know it all, was to open *that* door, boss, him or them wouldn't want to open 'nother in a hurry—no they wouldn't, now! No, sir, they jest *wouldn't*!"

"It hides a trap, then?"

"It hides Grim Death, you mean! An' Grim Death—well, I do reckon he's own brother to the kunnel. A painter, big 'nough fer to chaw your head (if at one nip!)"

Once more Wheeler snowed his surprise without disguise. It relieved his own emotions, and gratified the pride of Peleg Ounce, so why not?

"And the other pits, Peleg? Can Colonel Cougar pass through with the goods? Is Grim Death a trained pet? Tell it all, man!"

"I do reckon Grim Death'd chaw the kunnel jest as quick as any other pusson, boss. But he don't hev to pass through *that* way. Thar's a hole to git in at, on the top o' the airth, outside the store-chamber, an' that's the way the best goods is chucked in. An' the other sular, like, which is easier to find ef a close hunt was made fer it by them that wasn't wanted to find it *all* out, is jest 'nother sech death-trap as the one as holds Grim Death snug, 'ceptin' it hes two big painters shet up into it."

"Well, well, that does get away with the whole confectionery!" ejaculated White-horse Wheeler, and this time his amazement was not wholly artificial. "He's rightly named Colonel Cougar! If 'twas me, I'd never be satisfied with so meek a title: I'd be General, with a big G!"

"Ef you was to call him Devil, with a monstrous big D, boss, you'd come nigher to hittin' the truth!" muttered Ounce, with another nervous glance around them. "When I come to think up what a pizen critter he shorely is, it jest cold-shivers me all over to think! Ef he was to jest dream how I've— Good Lawd!"

"He'll never so much as dream of your havin' a finger in the pie, pardner. All I ask of you further, is to show me the main points—you can show me where the store-house is, Peleg?"

"I kin, but—"

"Good enough! You'll show me the place, and teach me how to enter it by the hidden opening outside. You know the trick, ef course?"

Peleg nodded assent, but now that he had made his revelation, the natural reaction was coming, and fear was rapidly getting the better of his rage and thirst for vengeance on those who had hung him up.

"Better yet! You'll go along with me, and after you've pointed the spot out, and showed me how to work the trick, you can pull out for safer quarters, just as soon as it likes you. Or, if you care to stick by me, I'll see that no harm comes to you from those rascals."

With that assurance, White-horse Wheeler rose erect, and they were about to make for the spot where Whirlygust was patiently waiting the return of his master, when Peleg Ounce gave a frightened start, gripping the detective's arm convulsively as he hoarsely cried:

"Look yender! A spook—he's sent a spook to ha'n't me fer tellin'!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A MIDNIGHT MEETING.

ALTHOUGH Maurice Filley had tried his best to calm the fears which his mother and sister must naturally feel, his success was anything but flattering. Then, too, his strong agitation, which he so clearly was doing battle with before he abruptly left the cavern in which they had sought refuge from the marauding *men*, increased rather than lessened their fears.

The minutes crawl sluggishly at such times, and long before Maurice had any positive knowledge of having left the cave at all, mother and sister were growing uneasy at his protracted absence.

They had drawn close together, for mutual comfort of mind rather than of body. The air of the cavern was fairly dry, and they had enough blankets to defy cold.

In guarded whispers mother and daughter talked together, wondering, hoping, surmising, but never openly fearing, at first. And because they each avoided that one point in which they were so deeply interested, each knew that the other was really fearing the very worst.

At length that knowledge brought them still closer together, in mind and in heart, and though their tears fell freely while they consoled each other, that yielding to morbid fears actually did them good.

They knew now what was the worst each one feared, and while trying to hope all would come out right in the end, they could talk together without having to keep watch and ward over each word.

"Then, too, if I see you and Maurice whispering together, I'll know that you're trying to coax the whole truth from him, and I'll keep out of the way until— You will make him tell you, Linda? He'll tell you, what he'd be afraid to tell me, and—"

"Oh, mother! I'll try, but brother always trusted you, his mother—"

"Yes, I'm his mother," murmured Mrs. Filley, with a husky catch in her voice as she added: "I'm Anderson's wife, too! And he— Oh, oh!"

The poor woman broke down in sobs that were all the more difficult to bear because they seemed confined; there was a great lump in her throat which blocked the passage.

Linda gave her whole attention to soothing her mother, and that hysterical spell was strange enough, neither of the twain having ever experienced aught like it before, to occupy the girl so entirely that she had no time for brooding over their other troubles.

Mrs. Filley, physically exhausted, at length consented to lie still on the neat pallet which Linda made by the faint light of the single candle, and covering her over with a warm blanket, Linda sat at her side without speech or motion, until the regular breathing told her that sleep had come to the mourning wife's relief.

Then it was that the hardest trial came upon the girl. There was nothing but her thoughts to keep her company, and their dark, chilling nature made them almost maddening.

Her father was gone, and despite the assurance given them by Maurice, she feared that serious misfortune had overtaken him. If all had gone well, as Maurice tried to make out, would her brother be so agitated, so unlike his usual self? Instead of showing such haste to leave them alone, there in that dismal den, would he not rather have lingered to fully reassure them?

"He was afraid to face mother!" Linda repeated for the uncounted time. "He ran away from the light, so she wouldn't see the awful truth written in his face. He was a coward—and I love him all the better for it, too!"

By which the little lady meant filial cowardice, for, like all true women, she adored bravery in the opposite sex, and if she had been close pressed on that point, Linda could have named one who stood to her as a model in that line.

Part of her thoughts that trying evening were given to him; to wondering where he was just then, to hoping that he was far away, out of all possible danger from those dreadful savages, to longing for one glimpse of his noble countenance, one touch of his strong hand, one word from his true lips!

If he was only here, how much easier it all would become! He would quickly straighten matters out and right all wrongs!

By which the reader can give a shrewd guess as to the state of Miss Linda's heart, if he or she cares to take the trouble.

From thinking, Linda grew tempted to act. The long absence of Maurice was beginning to worry her beyond endurance.

"He's afraid to come back—poor fellow!" she fell to reasoning. "He's afraid to face poor mother, and tell her—he knows she'd read the whole truth in his dear face, even though he kept his lips tight locked! And so—if mother would only stay sleeping!"

Having yielded to temptation in thought, the rest came easy enough.

Linda bent breathlessly over her mother, fearing to waken her in case she should be sleeping, then drew back with a sigh of relief.

"Dear mammy! She'll sleep on until— I'll surely find him, just outside!"

Making the least noise possible, Linda crept away from the sleeping mother, going to the cave-entrance and peering forth, with an odd mixture of fear and boldness.

She could see nothing to awaken her suspicions, nor confirm her belief that Maurice was hard by, and so, gently at first, but gradually louder, she called his name, ceasing only when she feared the sound of her voice might arouse her sleeping mother.

Having ventured thus far against orders, Linda naturally ventured still further. She had set out to find her brother, to learn from his lips the entire truth, and she could not turn back so soon.

Failing to find Maurice near the cave-entrance, she naturally thought of their home, and without pausing long enough to grow frightened through weighing the risk she might be running, Linda stole hastily yet cautiously toward the deserted ranch.

Nothing occurred to alarm her, until she was drawing near the house, but then a sharp, strange cry startled her, and catching sight of dusky figures in motion only a few rods distant, the frightened girl turned to seek safety in flight.

But keener eyes than hers were taking notes, and as White-horse Wheeler recognized the loose garb of a woman, he jumped to the right conclusion, and sprung forward in chase, at the same time calling out:

"Don't be frightened, Linda! It's a friend—I'm Edgar Winston!"

That name and voice combined, produced the desired effect, and with a sob of joyful relief, Linda paused, turned, was clasped to the bosom of the revenue scout, all in a single breath!

"I thought—I feared—"

"And I was hunting for you, Linda," quickly said Wheeler, "for you and your mother. I had almost given up hopes of finding you, when we caught sight of a ghost—of you, dear girl!"

Neither man nor maiden were exactly accountable for what they said or did, during those first few moments, be it remembered. The meeting was an extraordinary one, and if their conduct savored of the same, who can reasonably object?

It was for Peleg Ounce to recall White-horse Wheeler to his senses, which he did by giving vent to an ejaculation of amazed relief, at seeing his spook transformed into a neat parcel of living beauty.

The couple stood in a patch of moonlight, sufficiently bright to render their actions as well as figures plainly visible, so Peleg must have spoken by the card when he spluttered:

"Good lawd! Ketched the spook, an' huggin' of it like—durned ef 'tain't Lindy Filley, her own dical self, so 'tis, now!"

The maiden gave a faint cry of fright, but Wheeler quickly reassured her, though his attitude naturally became less affectionate, now that his senses were recalled.

Explanations were the order of the day for the next minute or two, and Wheeler contrived to account for his presence in that vicinity without telling all the ugly truth, as he saw it.

On her part, Linda explained how Maurice had hurried her mother and herself away from home, and how she had stolen forth to learn, if possible, the cause of his protracted absence.

"You ought not to have done that, Linda," said Wheeler, his chiding voice sounding almost harsh as he thought of what might have been, had Milo Plunkett delayed his retreat yet a little longer. "You don't know what danger you incurred by— But I'm glad you did it, after all! If you hadn't, maybe I'd never have found you, at all!"

Peleg Ounce, completely cut out of the conversation, which fact may have felt doubly pointed by contrast with the prominence he had held only a brief space before, gave a hollow groan of uneasy disgust, which reminded Wheeler of his existence and spurred him to action.

In a whisper bidding Linda wait for an instant, the revenue scout turned to Peleg, drawing him a little aside, then speaking earnestly:

"I haven't had time as yet to thank you for your information, pardner, but I'll make it all up in the end. Of course I'm going to look after Miss Filley, first, and, while I'm taking her back to her mother, how about you?"

"Cain't I go 'long, boss?" meekly whined Peleg.

"You could, of course, but—the less trail we lay, the safer, and that means leaving the horses behind. Will you stay and watch them until I can come back?"

"You won't—you shore will come back, boss!"

"I surely will, Peleg. You've seen the good horse that gave me the name I bear. Would I desert him? And, as proof how surely I trust you, pardner, I leave him in your care. Can I say more than that?"

This was the sort of argument best suited to Peleg's caliber, and with a sense of pride which he had rarely felt before, he accepted the trust, and gave not even a whine as the young couple moved away through the mingled light and darkness.

A few words satisfied Linda that Maurice could not be lingering about the house, and she made no difficulty about guiding Edgar Winston, as she knew White-horse Wheeler, to the cavern in which they had sought refuge from the Indians.

The trip was quickly made, for the detective had firmly put aside his lovely longings for the time being, and was trying to decide just how much, or how little, of the dark truth he had

better tell Mrs. Filley when she questioned him, as she surely would.

As they drew near the mouth of the cavern, Linda somewhat nervously begged her companion to wait outside, until she could prepare her mother for his coming; but that suggested precaution was needless.

"You have come back, child?" the gentle voice of Mrs. Filley asked, while the accompanying rustling of branches told of her parting the leafy screen which so completely masked that opening among the rocks. "There's some one with you: Maurice, my dear boy?"

"It isn't Maurice, Mrs. Filley," said Wheeler, advancing quickly, "but I trust you'll believe me when I say that 'tis a true friend!"

"You, Mr. Winston?" ejaculated the woman. "Where is my husband?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

A DETECTIVE IN LOVE.

WITH trembling eagerness came that question, and catching his extended hands, drawing back through the opening at the same time, Mrs. Filley brought the detective under the clear if limited light shed by the burning candle.

Her eyes were fixed upon his face, with piteous eagerness, and her voice quavered as she said, again:

"Where is my husband, sir? Where is he—and my boy?"

Feeling that evasion would be cruel as it was useless, White-horse Wheeler responded, in grave, sympathetic tones:

"I had hoped to find them with you, dear Mrs. Filley, but their absence is not proof positive that harm has come to either one of them."

Non-committal though his answer was, it caused the poor woman to shrink and shiver, almost as though a blow had been given her. Only for a brief space, however. Then, rallying, she clasped his hands between both of hers, speaking with forced composure:

"You have something which you fear to tell me, sir. I can read it in your eyes, in your face, in the touch of your hands. Tell me—all! Tell me all, if you are a man!"

"Mother!"

"Peace!" turning a swift glance toward the startled girl. "You were afraid to trust me, but this gentleman— Sir," turning once again to the detective, her voice growing calmer, through pure force of will, "you think I'm not strong enough to bear it. Feel of my hands; are they those of a cowardly woman? Touch my pulse—so!"

It was piteous to see and to hear, but White-horse Wheeler knew she was right. However heavily that blow might fall, better fall and reveal the very worst, than hang above her head with all its unknown horrors.

"They are the hands of a good, true, loving woman, Mrs. Filley," he said, taking her across to the pallet from which she had risen on discovering the absence of her daughter. "Sit down, dear ma'am, and I'll tell you what little I know."

With enforced calmness Mrs. Filley obeyed. She asked no questions, but gazed pleadingly into his grave, kindly face as he sat down near by.

"I'd be lying to you, Mrs. Filley, if I said outright that your husband has not been in great peril, but I'm telling you my honest opinion when I say that I'm almost certain he has pulled through safely."

"You heard—you have seen him, then?" faltered Mrs. Filley, finding it terribly hard to utter even so many words without breaking down.

"Yes, I saw him," and then White-horse Wheeler went on to tell just how he chanced to spy the rancher fleeing for life from the redskins.

It was by no means an easy story to narrate, to those so deeply interested in the outcome, but he made the best of it all. And if he stretched the truth a trifle, with Linda gazing piteously into his face, who shall blame him?

"There was only one chance I could give him, Mrs. Filley, and that I did give, not only for his own sake, but for the sake of those he loved so dearly, here at home. I scattered the red imps, and shouted to him to catch a pony and make for home."

"But—he hasn't come!" huskily murmured the wife, bowing her head and hiding her tear-wet face in trembling hands.

"Brother said he was going after help, you know, mother, dear," ventured Linda, and found her reward in the grateful glance which those dark eyes shot her, before their owner cheerfully cried:

"And of course that is just why he hasn't come home before this, my dear madam! It's a long ride—neighbors are so scarce, up this way! And he'll surely come, in good time, to join in your laughing over these fears."

It was not a very hearty effort, but it proved his good-will, and Mrs. Filley was woman enough to show that she appreciated it at its full value.

She lifted her head, wiping her tear-damp hands before clasping those of the revenue scout, to say:

"I thank you, Mr. Winston, thank you from the bottom of my heart. You risked your life, trying to save that of my husband, and if you failed—"

"But I *didn't* fail, dear madam!"

"Yes, you did, sir," with grave sadness in face and in voice. "If my good man had escaped those red devils, he'd surely have come home, long before this. But—I'm grateful to you for what you tried to do. I'll never forget it—while life lasts!"

"You must not look at it in so dark a light, Mrs. Filley," the detective urged, though it was with difficulty that he could maintain his own outward appearance, particularly as he heard Linda withdraw apart to smother her pitiful sobs of grief and despair. "I can't believe that Mr. Filley was—that he didn't escape, after the chance I gave him. Why, ma'am, I saw him mounting a fresh horse, with a long start of the Indians, before I was driven over the swell!"

"He hasn't come home, sir," huskily repeated the stricken wife.

"That is bad, of course, but how much worse it might be! He may have been driven far out of his course while trying to escape the Indians, and that would account for his delay in coming home. For come home he *surely will*! I feel it—I wish I felt as sure of inheriting heaven when my time comes, dear Mrs. Filley!"

White-horse Wheeler had succeeded in convincing himself, if not the sorrowing wife, and Linda caught a little of his renewed hope. Not so the wife and mother. She felt that all was lost, and made no effort to disguise that despair.

"You're very kind, sir, and I'll not forget it to you. But—I can't hope that way! He's dead—my poor husband! And—my boy, too! He knew of it—he couldn't look me in the face, knowing what I would surely read in his dear eyes. And so he went away, to— Lost—both lost!"

She buried her face in the blankets, lying still, save for a faint shivering. Alarmed at this, Wheeler summoned Linda, but her attempt at soothing words was rejected.

"Go away for a bit, girly," huskily muttered the sorely-smitten woman. "I'm not dying—people can't die of such misery! Let me be by myself for a bit. Then—I'll be better, deary."

Linda looked appealingly to the detective, who gently drew her away, speaking with grave quietness:

"I reckon your mother is right, Linda, and that she'll be better for being left to herself a little. And you—you don't refuse to hope for the best?"

Linda gazed piteously into his eyes, trying to read his real belief there. Wheeler bravely met her scrutiny, all the more readily because he himself had come to think Anderson Filley had won his way free.

"Do you *really* hope, Edgar?" the maiden asked, earnestly.

"Could I look into your dear eyes and say yes, if I was lying, Linda? And I *am* looking into them, and I only wish I might—"

Wheeler cut his impetuous speech short, for the maiden involuntarily shrunk away a trifle. It was hard to look his feelings up, for, never until this hour had he realized how intensely he loved this girl. Yet he knew that he could hardly have chosen a less propitious moment for uttering a love speech.

"Then I will hope, with you, sir," murmured Linda, her cheeks showing a more natural tinge of color, just then. "Only—if father would only just come! If he only might!"

"I believe he *will* come, Linda, but just as soon as it is light enough to read sign, I'll ride over to where I lost sight of him, and never give over until I've traced out the whole truth."

"You will?" eagerly asked the girl, clasping his hands between hers, drawing closer to instead of shrinking from the man who loved her.

"You will do this—for mother's sake?"

"Why not for *your* sake, Linda?"

"For all of us, then," murmured the maiden, her eager eyes drooping before that ardent gaze.

"I'll do it, of course. Even if I had no other interest in the matter, I'd do it for *your* dear sake, my dear, because I love you so—"

A little hand flew up to cover his lips, then Linda shrunk back, a touch of reproving pain in her voice as she murmured:

"Don't—please don't, sir! Is this a time for—such idle words, Mr. Winston?"

White-horse Wheeler gave a rueful sigh as he muttered:

"I'm afraid it isn't, from your point of view, Linda, but—may I repeat them, later?"

There was no immediate reply. Linda stood with bowed head, hands hiding her painfully flushed cheeks.

She was a bit frightened, but it was not altogether at hearing such words from those lips. They sounded very sweet—so sweet to her tingling ears that she was frightened at her own tremulous joy.

How could she feel so happy while her poor mother was suffering so intensely? How could she have such deliciously sweet thoughts while her brother was missing, her father lost—if not murdered?

White-horse Wheeler, feeling in a measure

guilty of rash imprudence, if nothing worse, under the circumstances, did not attempt to hasten her decision. He stood silently by, his ardent soul shining through his eyes, scarcely daring to hope, yet feeling that this hour must determine his entire future.

Presently Linda lowered her hands, shyly lifting her eyes to meet his, but gaining courage from his gently grave countenance.

"You will do this, Edgar Winston? You will save them—my father, my brother?"

"I will try my level best, Linda," was his earnest reply. "I'll do all that one man can do, and you can be certain that will not be less because I'm almost ashamed of making such a condition. And yet, if you could only give me a word of hope, Linda!"

The girl cast a shy glance across to where her mother was lying, but Mrs. Filley was lost to all save her great grief, and paid no heed to what was transpiring so near at hand.

"Is it so hard to say, little woman?" murmured Wheeler, catching her hands between his, bending lovingly over her trembling form as he added: "Just one word, darling! Just say that I may hope to win you, some day!"

"Not now—not *that*!" murmured Linda, shrinking away, but only for a brief space; rallying, she looked bravely into his disappointed face, to say: "I'll tell you this, Edgar Winston: I love no other man, *in that way*!"

His arms closed about her lithe form, but then, with a strong effort of will, he released the maiden, stepping back with hands locked behind him, the better to resist temptation. And he said, quickly:

"I'll wait, Linda. Tell mother what I'm going to do. Be wary, and don't step outside of the cave until they come, or I return. I'm going now, to look up Maurice. Good-by, until then!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

COLONEL COUGAR ANTICIPATES.

CLOSING the trap-door above his captives, Darke Cruger strode out of that room into the one adjoining, a gesture of his hand bidding Milo Plunkett bear him company.

There had been a show of grim jocosity in his parting speech to the Filleys, father and son, but all that had vanished now, and his florid face showed nothing less than savage hatred for his prisoners.

"Curse them, man and boy!" he growled; hoarsely, striking the air with his tightly clinched fist, his eyes fairly glowing with rage. "I had to cut it short off, or I'd have torn their stubborn tongues out, to cram down each other's throat!"

Milo Plunkett did not venture to reply to this fierce outburst, although he had the words at the tip of his tongue.

Even he was afraid of the smuggler chief at odd times, and never before had he known Colonel Cruger more thoroughly worked up than right now.

Something in his dark face told Cruger as much, and, after staring for a few seconds at his next in command, he broke into a laugh, dropping back in a chair, looking and speaking more naturally.

"Hope I didn't scare you, youngster? I was hot—red-hot—but not against you, be sure of that. Only, those stubborn idiots worked me up until I'm sweating under the collar!"

"Well, chief, according to my notion, there's only one method of dealing with their sort: put 'em where they can't talk, even when they try the hardest!"

"Croaking, you mean?"

"How else can we ever be sure of their silence, colonel?"

"Why, man, dear, you're worse than I was!" ejaculated Cruger, in real or well-assumed surprise. "Here I rather expected to have you reading me a grave lecture on man's inhumanity to man, and instead— You're joking, Plunkett!"

"How much of a joke will it be to us all, colonel, when the revenue sharks light down upon us, through information laid by the Filleys?"

"That time'll never come, Plunkett!"

"Yet I found a paper which certainly points that way, sir."

"And I've got it, haven't I? You found it before it had touched other hands, or met other eyes. So much for *that*: and I mean to guard against another list being sent forth."

The lieutenant asked no questions, so far as his tongue was concerned, but his eyes were not so reticent, and Colonel Cougar chuckled afresh as he read their anxious gaze aright.

"Then you really took it all for gas, Milo? Don't you keep on thinking that way, man, dear! I'm in sober earnest when I tell you, what I told them: that both father and son shall join the family, with all that implies, or never look at the day again!"

The lieutenant could not keep from flinging out one hand in an impatient, almost contemptuous gesture.

"You surely *must* be joking, chief! Even if you could force them to take all oaths, which I

seriously doubt, they could never be trusted as members of such an association should be relied upon. They'd sell us all out at the first possible chance, and hatch up a thousand worse crimes to make it more binding."

Milo Plunkett was deeply in earnest, as both face and voice gave evidence, but his impetuous speech produced precious little effect on his commander in crime.

He listened to the end, with a broadening smile, and when Plunkett broke off speaking, his retort was ready.

"Not if Linda Filley is my lawful wife, they won't, old fellow!"

Plunkett swiftly averted his face, ostensibly to cough, but really to conceal the venomous look which he could not keep from leaping into his countenance. Had Colonel Cougar caught that, in its full force, he might well have paused to consider.

Plunkett rallied swiftly, and as a hand passed over his face with that feigned cough, it brushed away all dangerous signs, and it was a cold, composed visage that Cruger gazed into a moment later.

"You really mean to give us a wedding, then, colonel?"

"I never felt more set on anything in my life, Milo," came the prompt response. "And, though you may hardly think it, looking at the big cinch the little lady holds over me in lack of years, I don't reckon I'll have such a terribly tough fight in getting Linda to fall in with my scheme."

"You've been paving the way, then, colonel?" asked Plunkett, with a forced smile, but which served just as well as though genuine.

Still, Darke Cruger seemed to scent a jest, and his face flushed up a bit more than usual, while his voice took on a crusty snap as he said:

"That's all right, pardner! If I'm satisfied, you have no occasion to kick because of scanty courtship. Now—drop talk, and come down to business!"

"I'm ready, and waiting, colonel," said Plunkett, saluting.

"As ever—good boy!" nodded his chief, with greater cordiality. "Well, this is my programme, so far as the Filley family is concerned:

"Of course the boy knows where the women are stowed away, and of course the old man will be mighty anxious to find it out. He'll ask, or the kid'll tell on his own book. Well, what's to hinder my playing eavesdropper for a bit?"

"At the trap-door, colonel?"

"Well, hardly!" with a curl of his lip at that innocent query. "Not such a fool, Milo, for of course they'll be on guard against *that* point. Can't I go to the store-house, though?"

"And from that, into Grim Death's den?"

This time Colonel Cougar laughed outright, seemingly hugely amused by the unusual dullness of his lieutenant. As a rule, Plunkett was the first to catch or to suggest a keen point, but on this occasion he was particularly stupid, it seemed.

"Not a bit of it, old fellow, and I'll tell you why. I left them both full use of their legs, didn't I?"

Plunkett nodded assent, but still with a puzzled look in his face.

"Well, if I had thought to play spy from the room, in yonder, wouldn't I have trussed them up so tight that they couldn't get away, even to the corners? Sure, for I'd have wanted them as near my ears as might be. Since I left them free to walk, what reason?"

"So they could go into the other den?" suggested Plunkett.

"Just that, of course! You're beginning to wake up, pardner, and if I had an extra hour or two to spend in hammering at your skull, I might begin to rouse your wits! What's the matter with you to-night, Plunkett, anyway?"

"Well, I can't help thinking about that cursed detective," frankly admitted the lieutenant, then adding, earnestly:

"Can't I take a couple or three good lads, colonel, and have a hunt for White-horse Wheeler?"

Colonel Cougar frowned blackly at mention of that hated title, but his words touched a different subject:

"I wanted you to be on hand, Plunkett, to send after the women folk if I manage to find out, through playing spy, just where they are stowed away."

"Wouldn't some of the other men do just as well for that, chief? Now that we know White-horse Wheeler is in these parts, there's nothing like safety for us until he's croaked, for good and all!"

"You're right, as to that, and if you really wish it—"

"I *do* wish it, chief!" eagerly cried the lieutenant, rising to his feet like one who can hardly contain his impatience. "I'm laying odds that we can catch the devil prowling about the spot where we discharged Peleg Ounce, and if we do—"

"Fill him too full of holes for anything but a skimmer, man!"

"You bet we will, colonel," said Plunkett,

with a short, hard laugh. "Then I can go? I can pick my men to suit?"

"Take your pick, and pick as many as you like, Plunkett. If this fellow is the genuine White-horse Wheeler, rumor lies like fury if he isn't a mighty tough nut to crack!"

"I'll do the cracking, colonel, if I can only do the finding."

With that grim pledge, Milo Plunkett left the room on his mission, followed to the threshold by Colonel Cougar, with a final word:

"While looking for him, don't forget them, Plunkett. If luck should be good to you, fetch them back here, and we'll just have a holy picnic! With the women fast, it'll be easy enough to pinch you old fool into making a clean breast of it. Then— You can guess at the rest!"

Leaving Plunkett to select his men for the new venture, Colonel Cougar left the Lone Ranch behind him, passing out of sight of any eyes which might feel curiosity enough to take note of his course. He made a circuit sufficiently wide to satisfy himself that no one was watching his movements, then turned more directly toward the particular destination he had in his mind.

"Not that any of the lads are crazy enough to play dog on me," he mused, with a grim smile at the thought. "Still, it's better to keep on the safest side, at all times. If a man never begins to be careless, he'll surely never end that way!"

The nearer Colonel Cougar drew to the particular point he had in view when leaving the Lone Ranch, the more guarded grew his movements, and he covered the last two-score rods almost at a snail's pace, making frequent stops, to gaze and to hearken, plainly resolved to run no chances of discovery by either friend or enemy.

Not that he really feared either one or the other was near enough to play spy on his movements, but as he had so often preached the stern necessity of unceasing caution on that one point, so he religiously practiced what he preached to others.

Much time, pains and money had been spent in perfecting that odd chain of stone cells, and reckless though he might be in other matters, on this one point Colonel Cougar was a veritable crank!

Only when perfectly sure that his movements were unobserved, did the smuggler chieftain creep forward to the hidden entrance to the store-house, and even then he chose a time when the full moon was hidden by a dense cloud, which cast all into obscurity below.

Perfectly familiar with the spot and its secrets, Colonel Cougar was wholly independent of light, and long before the cloud passed from in front of the moon, he had opened the hidden trap-door through which admission could be had to the stone cell, and unfastening the rope ladder which was fastened in a neat coil to an iron hook screwed into the under surface of that door, he let the coils unroll until only one end remained in his hands.

The stout hook with which this end was furnished he slipped into a hole drilled in an edge of the flat stone coming next to the door, and knowing from past experience how secure all fastenings were, he swung himself into the opening, clinging to the ladder with one hand while using the other to lower the trap over his head.

"So far, so good!" he muttered, with grim expectation, as he descended the ladder. "Now, to hear those fools chatter!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

MILO PLUNKETT fell to work with just as much caution as his chief was displaying, but he accomplished his purpose in a much shorter space of time.

Without giving any of the other men a hint as to his intentions, or a chance to ask inconvenient questions, he quietly dropped a sufficient hint into two pair of ears, then looked after his own horse, preparing it for the road, and leaving the Lone Ranch inside of five minutes from the parting between himself and the colonel.

He drew rein when at a certain point, barely out of sight of the Lone Ranch, listening for the coming of the two knaves whom he had chosen out of all that evil gang.

He was not kept long in waiting. Scarcely had he drawn rein to bend a listening ear, than he caught the gentle trample of hoofs, and, one after the other, his picked men came riding up to the rendezvous.

"All right, lads," was his brief greeting. "Follow for a bit, and when we're in safer quarters, I'll talk to you."

Leaving the Lone Ranch something like a mile behind them, Milo Plunkett drew rein, and as his mates drew close to him, one on either side, he began his explanation.

One of the men had been of his force when they were discomfited by White-horse Wheeler. That was Peter Morris, who has already been introduced by name, and who was the tall

knave who started that "circus" by his shot at the revenue scout. The other was a much smaller man, so far as physical dimensions went, but in cool nerve, utter scoundrelism, and general wickedness, Jack Broome was far ahead of his big mate.

By way of preface, Plunkett gave a sketchy detail of all that had taken place within the Lone Ranch, so far as his own knowledge went, and then he grimly added:

"It's a gloomy prospect for us poor devils, and I'm telling you that, *hard!* The chief is all but crazed over a petticoat, and just so he can carry his own pet ends, he isn't giving a curse for our health!"

"Waal, I reckon the boss'll scorch his tongue, ef the rest o' us hev to sup hot soup—eh?" ventured Peter Morris, feeling his way with characteristic caution.

"Provided he don't hang back until it's all dished out to us, why don't you add?" bitterly supplemented Plunkett.

Jack Broome caught at the hint thus conveyed, and in subdued tones he asked, pointedly:

"You're meanin' a heap more'n you say, pardner. If we're to help you in any sort of job, speak out, flat-footed."

"If I prove to you that we've got to take care of ourselves, or have the law take care of us, you'll stick by me, lads?"

"You kin jest bet I don't hanker fer no law in mine, boss!" hastily spluttered Big Peter, while Jack Broome intimated something of the same sort, though in more guarded fashion.

Milo Plunkett knew his men thoroughly, and felt confident that he could carry them along with him, no matter what course he might see fit to take. His hesitation was but the natural shivering of a swimmer on taking a cold plunge, and he lost no further time.

"Of course we've sworn to stick by the chief through thick and thin, boys," he said, speaking rapidly. "We've done so, up to date, and I reckon we'd never have done anything else, had Cruger stuck to his part of the compact. But—he isn't doing that *now!* He's laughed in my face when I warned him that if he kept on as he's started, everything was dead-sure to go to ruin, taking us with it! Now—I know Cruger has proved himself a good man in the past, but—so have we!"

"After all, he's only one man, and each one of us counts just as many. Our liberty is just as sweet to us, as his can be to him, and if it came to a choice, I reckon either one of you would rather see him downed, than to fall yourselves. Wouldn't you?"

This time the response was simultaneous. Set forth in that light, there could be but one answer, and that was an assent.

"Good enough! I swear to you both, that the chief is taking a line that will surely bring every man jack of us to the dock! Unless we turn against him, to save ourselves, that is! Now—will you both swear by all that's good and bad, to stick by me in this, boys?"

"I'll go it blind, ef you say that's best, boss!"

"And I am with you, Plunkett!"

"I don't ask you to go it blind, for I brought you out here, meaning to tell you the whole truth," earnestly added the lieutenant. "And as a proof, listen to this:

"Although the Filleys, father and son, have been playing spy on the gang long enough to get a complete list of our names, and had them all written out for delivery to the sheriff, Cruger swears that they must join us, and that he'll force them to take the oath. To do this, he counts on catching the women, and making the girl marry him! Now, even if he succeeds so far, how long will it be until those curs betray us all to the law?"

"No longer than they had to wait for a chance! I wanted to kill the kid, off-hand, when I caught him spying, but Westgate and his cursed dog choked me off!"

"Well, you can even up, if you see fit, old fellow, and I'll show you just how to turn the trick. But, first, maybe you didn't know that the chief is sailing under a false name, up here? Maybe you didn't know that there are rewards still standing against him, amounting 'way up in the thousands?"

Both rascals plainly showed their ignorance on these points, and Milo Plunkett chuckled grimly at their ejaculations of amazement.

"All the same, it's Gospel truth I'm reeling off to you, boys. Just the weentiest hint, if let drop in a quarter I know, would fetch a force after the chief, and put big money into the pockets of those who let that hint fly. Now—would either of you seriously object to taking that pile?"

"Not ef—but *how?*"

"To be shared with you, of course?" cautiously asked Jack Broome.

"Oh, I'll give you both a quit-claim on my share, if that's all that bothers you," Plunkett said, with a low, ugly chuckle. "I'll make my pay in another fashion, although I'll need your help for a few hours."

The two lesser rascals looked at each other, and Plunkett quickly added:

"Mind ye, lads, I'm not asking you to run any greater risk than you are running right now. If I break it off, you can only wait and

wonder, for I know you'll never dare speak to the chief against me, for he'd never hear you through; his gun would go off of its own accord, first!"

"What is it you expect us to do, first thing, Plunkett?"

"To swear that you'll back me up, through thick and thin!"

"I'll agree to that, if there's any good money in it, but—"

"Well, I'll agree to pay you each a hundred dollars, cash down, in the morning; of course I haven't got that much in my kicks, right now. As soon as you have helped me to turn the trick, I'll make it an even five hundred to both. Isn't that a fair offer?"

"Big 'nough to stuff a hog!" spluttered Morris, hastily, but Jack Broome was a little more guarded.

"What sort of trick is it you want our help in, Plunkett?"

The lieutenant hesitated, as though hurriedly debating with himself the advisability of being perfectly open, but apparently he decided in the negative, since he spoke:

"Enough for now, boys. I can't well explain further until we've found the Filley women, and got them—"

Jack Broome broke in, with a coarse chuckle of mingled amusement and surprise, following it up with the words:

"Hellow! is *that* the way the cat jumps, Plunkett? You're struck on the girl, too, pardner?"

"Well, yes, since you will have it! And I mean to make Linda Filley my wife, too!" boldly answered the lieutenant.

"Running opposition to the colonel, eh?"

"Does that fact scare you out, Jack Broome?"

"Never a bit of it, Plunkett," came the prompt response. "Only, it sort o' set my brain-pan to working, you know."

"In just what way?"

"Well, you said the chief was bound to fetch us all to ruin, through his crazy notion of making this same girl his wife. Now—how is it any different, simply because the officer is changed?"

"Well, the chief swore he meant to stay here, and still carry on the business, with the Filleys as partners. You can figure out how *that* must surely end!"

"Then you mean to act different, of course?"

"Certainly I do, or I'd be just as big a fool as Cruger is proving himself. But that don't concern you, for I'm offering you big wages, more than you can clear here in six months, besides a chance to rake in a little fortune just by saying a few words to the right man."

"How big a fortin' mought that pan out, boss?" covetously chipped in Peter Morris.

"Well, I know of rewards aggregating a cool four thousand dollars, and I wouldn't mind laying odds there's still more to hear from. Now, isn't that enough to pay you for working blind a few hours?"

"You jest bet it is, an' hyar's my paw onto it, boss!"

"And mine, Plunkett," said Broome. "I'd hang him myself for half the money."

CHAPTER XXIX.

COLONEL COUGAR PICKS HIS FLINT.

EVERY ray of light was shut out when Colonel Cougar lowered that trap-door behind him, but he cared nothing for that. He was thoroughly familiar with his present surroundings, and did not require the use of his eyes to carry him through.

Guiding himself by the sense of touch, the smuggler chief made his way through sundry packages and parcels, to the narrow, iron-studded door between the store house and the cell formerly occupied by Grim Death, the mountain lion. It was this door which had baffled the dawning hopes of Anderson Filley, after his exciting experience with the hungry cougar.

With never the slightest sound to betray himself, Colonel Cougar paused beside this door, bending his head and listening eagerly for the words which he had so confidently calculated on eavesdropping.

All was silent in that direction. Not a sound came from the cell beyond that closed door, but the smuggler chief would not yet admit himself defeated.

"The old fool has warned the kid!" he told himself, choking back a fierce curse of mingled impotence and rage. "He's looking out for another trick, I reckon, but he'll knuckle before long. He can't wait all night without knowing just what's happened, and I'll defy two men, shut up as they are, to keep from chattering!"

That portion of his reasoning was well enough, but only his own obstinate resolve to gain his ends, kept Colonel Cougar from admitting what he surely was shrewd enough to have thought of: the almost certainty that a single whisper would, as it could, long since have passed from son to father the information he was seeking through espial.

That idea had occurred to him, in fact, only to be cast aside as too disagreeable for use. Then, too, even if so, could the prisoners pass hours together, apparently wholly unwatched,

without talking the matter over in all its lights?

Something like this reasoning was called into play by the colonel while waiting and listening there at the door dividing store-house from lion's den.

He displayed unusual patience, for he was ever loth to admit the possibility of his being in the wrong or of his making an actual mistake; but minute after minute passed by without the faintest sound from human lips coming to his waiting ears through that barrier, and he was finally forced to change his tactics.

"Satan scorch that Plunkett!" he muttered, in a wolfish growl of growing rage. "He kept me, with his aimless chattering, so long that they've come and gone! Now—what next?"

That doubt did not hold him long inactive. He produced the key by means of which the division door was opened, and, inserting it with all possible caution, he shot back the heavy bolts, top and bottom.

He bent an ear in listening after each turn of the key, but all was still beyond. If the prisoners had indeed taken to Grim Death's den, as he had reasoned they would, neither father nor son was talking just then.

"Maybe they're waiting and watching, ready for a break-away!" the colonel suggested to himself, with a touch of grim scorn at the bare idea. "Well, if they want a holy picnic, reckon they can get it!"

Slowly, gently, Colonel Cougar pressed against that door, which opened away from him, as a surer guard against the imprisoned cougar breaking out in one of its mad rages.

Inch by inch the barrier opened, but not a sound came to those eagerly listening ears. A dim, indistinct light began to lessen the utter darkness; and the chief knew his prisoners had made no attempt to close the square door in the opposite wall.

Still, he could not catch even a passing whisper, and, weary with waiting for what never came, the colonel pushed the door wide, standing where no ray of light could strike his own person.

For a full minute he maintained that position, ready to foil any rush on the part of his captives should such be made, but then he stepped around into the doorway, knowing that one more failure was scored against him.

He could look directly into the first pit, but the light of the oil-lamp showed him nothing of his captives, and, silently creeping forward, he crossed the cougar's den, to pause when nearly at that other door.

He found it no easy matter to choke back the fierce curse which rose in his throat as he caught sight of the Filleys, father and son, sitting side by side, both silent, both apparently lost in sleep or in deep reflection.

He was strongly tempted to rouse them a . . . in an unpleasant fashion, but he was restrained by a remnant of his old prudence. To do that would surely show the prisoners another mode of reaching that spot, and he was not ready to let them more fully into the secrets of the Lone Ranch.

For some little time Colonel Cougar stood in waiting, hoping even against reason that the longed-for information might leak out; but in this, as in all else, he was fated to be disappointed.

Turning away, the chief passed through the narrow door, closing it behind him with as great caution as he had used in opening it. He shot home the bolts, then gave way to the savage disappointment with which his bosom was filled to overflowing.

He showered vicious curses on the two prisoners who had cost him all this trouble, without giving him aught but disappointment in return.

"I'll even it up, too, and don't you think I won't!" he snarled, shaking a fist in that direction, just as viciously as though the helpless captives could both hear and see that menace. "If you reckon you can play dirt, when I say play white, more fools you! I'll break your will, or break your backs!"

As there was nothing more to be hoped for on that tack, Colonel Cougar groped his way to the rope ladder, quickly rising until his head touched the closed trap-door. This he gently lifted, looking and listening for several moments before fairly raising the door far enough to permit the passage of his person.

There was nothing to excite his suspicions, and securing the rope ladder as he had found it, Colonel Cougar lowered the trap, removing all sign with practiced hands, then stealing silently away from the spot, making a half-circuit before openly approaching the Lone Ranch.

Smuggler Duke gave a low, half-growl as the chief entered the building, and as the colonel turned a glance in that direction, a sudden change came over his frowning countenance.

"That's your dog, Westgate?" he asked, guided to the burly smuggler by Martin's low reproof to Duke.

"Yes, boss. Hedon't mean any hurt, but you see, he's so used to keeping an eye open for his master, that he couldn't—"

"Is he worth anything else?" interrupted Colonel Cougar. "Can he pick up a trail?"

"Times he can, and times he won't, your honor," replied Westgate. "Is there any work on hand for us, sir?"

Colonel Cougar made a sign which brought dog and master to his heels, as he led the way into the next room: the same in which he had last parted from Milo Plunkett.

Closing the door behind them, Cruger spoke in low tones:

"You say that dog can trail, if he will. Can't you make him do it?"

"Not if he takes a notion the other way, sir," hesitatingly replied Westgate. "After all, boss, he's not a breed that one expects to do very much in that line, so—"

"Never mind hunting up excuses for him in advance, Westgate. Come into the next room with me."

Passing to the chamber above the stone cell, Colonel Cougar quickly lifted the trap-door, to see father and son still sitting together, with backs propped against the wall.

The sound of the opening trap drew their eyes upward, but neither father nor son gave greeting of any sort to their enemy as they saw his face outlined in that aperture.

"Well, gentlemen, how fares it with you, after so long?" jeeringly asked the smuggler leader.

"None the better for sighting your ugly phiz!" bluntly retorted Maurice, in true boyish fashion.

"Easy, son!" muttered Anderson Filley, in grave warning, but his low notes were caught by those keen ears above, and Colonel Cougar said:

"Oh, don't button him up, old neighbor! It pleases him, and don't hurt me, I assure you. But now—Maurice, lad?"

There came no reply. Since he was wanted to speak, Maurice naturally preferred keeping silence.

"Haven't recovered from your obstinate fit, as yet, eh? Well, I know you can't stop your ears so long as your hands are tied behind your back, so I'll just tell you: I want one of your boots for a bit!"

"Shall I drop down and get it, sir?" whispered Westgate. "With their arms tied, they can't well toss it up here."

Colonel Cougar dropped one end of the rope ladder over the edge of the trap, and while Westgate was descending, he spoke in warning:

"If you kick, so much the worse for both of you! I'll clap your legs in bonds, just so sure. Take note of that, will you?"

Possibly something in his harsh tones warned the prisoners that Colonel Cougar would a little rather than not add those bonds, if a fair excuse was offered him, for Martin Westgate experienced no difficulty in removing one of the boots worn by the younger Filley, and with it in his hand, the smuggler climbed up the rope ladder.

"Why don't you ask what I want the boot for, dear fellow?" jeeringly cried the chief, as he took possession of the foot-gear.

"Because you'd lie back, of course, you dirty thief!" boldly retorted the youngster.

"Not when I know the truth would hit you hardest," chuckled the villain, too well pleased with his new scheme to feel angry at plain talking. "You refused to give a decent answer to a civil question, but there's more'n one way to kill a cat! With this bit of leather, added to a keen nose, I reckon we can follow your trail back to the spot where your women-folk are in hiding!"

"You devil! If you dare—"

"Then play white, and save trouble all 'round the board," bluntly interrupted the colonel. "Tell me where to find the ladies, and I'll promise to treat them with all possible respect. Will you?"

"Not a word, father!" almost fiercely cried Maurice, and with a low groan of mingled despair and rage, the rancher drooped his head.

Colonel Cougar glared at the defiant youngster for a brief space, but realizing how hopeless any attempt to force a confession from his lips would be, he let the trap-door fall, securing it after the usual manner, then drawing back and rising erect, saying:

"Come, Westgate, and fetch your dog. You'll show me where Jack Broome had his racket with that devil's cub, and then we'll put your dog on the youngster's back trail. Come, I'm in a hurry to turn the trick!"

CHAPTER XXX.

WHITE HORSE WHEELER AT WORK.

AFRAID to trust himself further, lest his powerful love lead him to frighten Linda, the revenue scout left the cavern, and headed for the point where he had left Peleg Ounce in charge of Whirlygust.

His brain was in a mad whirl, for this was his first real love for woman, other than his mother, and when a man has passed his thirtieth year without succumbing to the rosy-fingered god, the attack comes hard and severe.

White-horse Wheeler was not an exception to the general rule, and he was forced to call a halt for clearing up his wits before he dared rejoin his new-found ally.

After a short, sharp struggle, the detective downed the lover, and when White-horse

Wheeler sent a faint warning signal to Peleg Ounce, he was once more the revenue scout, and all business.

"On deck, boss!" said the ragged guard, with an echo of pride in his husky tones as he rose up from his place of retirement. "Ye see, boss, I hain't run off, don't ye?"

"And mighty glad I am to see it, too, old fellow," cordially declared the detective, gripping a hand and pressing it warmly. "Stick by me for a few days, and I'll make a perfect man out of you, Peleg!"

"I raally begin fer to b'lieve mebbe you kin, boss," declared the ex-smuggler, betraying some little emotion. "But—ef the kunnel was to find it out, I do reckon he'd bloody murder me all over!"

"Instead of bothering you, Peleg, he'll find his hands more than full trying to guard his own head. You're not weakening, I hope, pardner? You surely want to even up with the gang that strung you up like a sheep-killing cur?"

"I'll try, sir, but—kin I run ef the kunnel does show up?"

"If you prefer, but, in your place, I'd a heap sight rather stay by to see the colonel downed, for keeps."

"An' you—you raally reckon you kin down him, boss?" asked the vagabond, his eyes widely opened, his tones filled with awe.

"I've sworn to do it, Peleg, and if I slip up, 'twill be my first rank failure," quietly replied the detective. "But that's talk enough on that point. Will you keep your promise, Peleg, and show me where the gang stows away their smuggled goods?"

"Right now, do you mean, boss?"

"Would you rather wait for broad daylight, Peleg?"

"Good Lawd! I wouldn't dast go nighst the place, boss, fer more money then this world ever clapped two eyes onto—no I wouldn't!"

"Then we'll get a move on, without losing any more time, old fellow. Come; you've ridden that U. S. critter once, so I reckon you can back him again."

With a signal to Whirlygust to follow, White-horse Wheeler led the way back to the spot where Peleg had so nearly lost his life, and finding the horse taken from the Sioux brave still tethered to the tree, little further time was lost in getting under way.

The creature seemed reconciled to the change of masters by this time, and gave Ounce very little trouble when once set in motion. And heading for the Lone Ranch, with the situation of which White-horse Wheeler was fairly familiar, the newly-made allies talked together in low, guarded tones, all the while keeping a keen lookout for possible meetings with the smugglers.

Although the revenue scout was resolved to make Peleg Ounce point out to him the location of the smugglers' store-house, he deemed it no more than prudent to ask him all about the contrivance, in case some unforeseen accident should lead to their separation before he had gained that valuable information.

Now that Peleg had fully forsworn allegiance to Cougar and his evil associates, he was more than willing to tell all he knew, and answered each and every question put him, without reservation.

As White-horse Wheeler had counted on, he was ardently longing for revenge upon the ones who had so brutally condemned him to a shameful death.

Still, even yet he could not conquer his fears where Colonel Cougar was concerned, and more than once he gave vent to his gloomy foreboding during that night-ride.

"He'll butcher me like a fat hog, an' I jest knows it! No man ever yit run crooked to his likin', an' got off 'thout payin' a turrible price fer it, an' 'twon't be my luck fer to break the record!"

"You're foolish, man!" a little irritably retorted the revenue scout. "I'm backing you up, as I told you at the send-off. Still, if that doesn't satisfy you, you can pull foot for another country just as soon as you fairly show me how to get into this store-house."

"An' you won't—you won't set the dogs onto me fer doin' of it that way, boss?"

"Never a bit, Peleg," with such heartiness that Ounce felt his doubts melting away. "So far from that, I'll be looking for you to run back, with both hands wide open for a share of the rewards. And I'll take care that you get your pay, in hard cash, old fellow!"

"Wish't I wasn't sech a dug-gun coward, boss, but—I was borned that way, I do reckon!"

Still, now that he felt privileged to run away from rising danger, Peleg showed more boldness, and when near enough to their destination to render further approach on horseback too risky for prudence, he gave White-horse Wheeler warning, and they dismounted.

The Indian horse was securely tied, but Whirlygust was left free. A word of caution from his master was all that was required. No fear of his going astray, or of creating trouble through making a noise.

Peleg Ounce led the way, closely followed by

White-horse Wheeler, silently approaching the little chain of stone cells from a direction where the cover was good, and there seemed less danger of meeting any of the smugglers, whom the unusual events of that busy night might have sent prowling about the premises.

It was White-horse Wheeler's keen eyes that caught first sight of a human figure at the secret entrance to the store-house, and with a reassuring grip on an arm of his guide, the detective watched and waited, taking note of every movement on the part of that phantom-like shape.

It was not until the figure stole silently away, and was fairly lost to their view, that Peleg Ounce huskily muttered:

"Good Lawd! Ef he'd jest looked this way! Ef he'd jest tuck an arm of his guide, the detective watched and waited, taking note of every movement on the part of that phantom-like shape."

"What! you surely don't mean— Who was it, man?"

"Kunnel—the boss, no less!"

White-horse Wheeler smothered a curse as he caught that tremulous answer, but he quickly rallied. "After all, would he have it different?"

True, he might possibly have captured the smuggler chief, had he known this night-prowler was he; but would that have been wisely done?

As yet he had nothing better than strong suspicions to work upon, for he felt morally certain that, in case of an actual struggle, such as this capture would surely have precipitated, he could place no sure dependence on Peleg Ounce. Ten chances to one, he would take to his heels at the first move, and never stop running while his breath lasted.

All this flashed through the busy brain of the detective in the space covered by a single breath, and, without further show of anger, he asked his companion:

"What do you suppose he was doing, Peleg? Is that anywhere near the trap?"

"It's right thar, boss—right whar he was a-settin'. An' him never so much as dreamin'—"

"Drop that, pardner, and get down to business. I'm going over yonder to take a closer look, and you're going with me to point out the secret way inside. Come, brace up, and get a move on you!"

Where coaxing might have failed, this blunt talk prevailed. Afraid to hang back, ashamed to run, Peleg crawled forward, sweeping the ground in every direction for an early glimpse of danger, should Colonel Cougar see fit to retrace his steps.

But, as we have seen, nothing of the sort took place. Never once deeming it possible that all his precautions had been taken in vain, the smuggler chief was hastening to put his fresh scheme to work.

Thanks to Peleg's thorough familiarity with the spot and the manner in which the store-house was entered, White-horse Wheeler experienced little difficulty in opening the hidden trap, which he persisted on doing, though Ounce strongly advised him against running such a risk.

"The boss'll find it out, jest so shore!" the frightened fellow declared, shivering until his teeth clicked audibly together. "He kin tell 'ith his eyes shet ef ary finger jest teches the place!"

"Well, it's a rule of mine, Peleg, to finish up my work as I go along," quietly retorted the revenue scout. "If you're too badly scared to stay and see me through, there's the whole world for your running over. Don't let me stop you. I'm going to see just what sort of place this is, in here!"

"Good Lawd! you don't mean—you hain't gwine down, boss!"

"I'm going down, if I have to take a tumble, Peleg," was the cool assurance. "Go keep watch, and warn me if anybody comes this way. If you don't, and I get killed through your neglect to send a warning, I'll haunt you through all eternity, old boy!"

While speaking, White-horse Wheeler was fastening the rope-ladder, and without further delay he began descending into the store-house.

CHAPTER XXXI. THE LOST ONES FOUND.

MILK PLUNKETT had struck the right key at last, and knew that he would experience little further difficulty in keeping those two covetous knaves in line with his wishes.

It was pretty much as big Peter said: enough to bluff a hog, while Jack Broome might have amended his answer, by including his own father.

The lieutenant gave the two knaves a few moments longer in which to more thoroughly test the flavor of his proposal, then spoke again:

"Of course I'm not giving away such a pudding as all this amounts to, without a hope for my own good, you understand, gentlemen. I'm not such a fool as to try that on, but this much I will say, and you can set it down for Gospel truth: my scheme will not interfere in the slightest with your little game, nor lessen your profits one measly dollar."

"That's hearty, and a man'd be worse than a hog to grunt after richer feed, but—couldn't we

work to better advantage if we knew just what mark you were firing at?" innocently asked Broome.

It was a clever lead, but Milo Plunkett readily parried it.

"Little by jerks, and you'll run less risk of getting into a tangle by mixing matters up, Jacky! First thing first, and when that's worked out all right, time enough to figure the second step. Now—listen:

"As a proof of good faith on your side, you fellows agree to help me find Mrs. Filley and her daughter."

"Wouldn't it be safer to put it help hunt for 'em, boss?"

"Mighty right you be, too!" grunted Morris, with a wry grimace as he recalled their recent failure in that same line. "Ef the critters hain't come back to the ranch, thar's a heap o' wideness layin' 'round in the dark fer to run through the sifter, now I tell ye."

"That's all right, boys," a bit impatiently spoke up their leader. "I've been racking my brain pretty lively since we paid that call, and now that the colonel has got both of the men folk in his grip, without striking any clew to the petticoats, I really believe I've found the clew for which he'd give—well, any one of our heads!"

That grim fancy appeared to tickle the two knaves, and they laughed as though heartily amused.

"Hits him off, to a t-y-ty! An' ef he wanted to know raal piert, I do reckon he'd lump in 'nother two or a couple o' heads!"

"Just so his own cabeza wasn't counted in the lot," contributed Jack Broome as his quota.

"That wears it out, so let me have my say," cut in Plunkett, plainly eager to get down to actual work, now that he had successfully paved the way for his plans. "Keep your eyes open for outsiders, and I can finish up explaining as we ride along. That will save a little time, at all events."

Heading toward the Filley Ranch, the lieutenant gave his henchmen the required clew, and with them keeping a keen lookout, he finished his talking for the present.

"While I can't take my oath to that effect, I fully believe that Kid Filley stowed his women-folk in a cave of some description, not far from the house, before he got tangled up with you fellows at the crossing, Broome."

"Maybe, boss, but I've never heard of any such place."

"I've only heard a stray whisper about it myself," added Plunkett. "I can't say just where it ought to be, or if it's a fit place for women to hide in, but that there is some such place, I'm dead sure."

"Well, we're willing to help hunt after it, sir."

"I heard it mentioned only a few days ago, while at the Filley Ranch: Linda let drop a word or two, but the kid shut her up, too quick! I let on I never noticed anything out of the usual run, and in fact I really forgot all about it, until to-night. Then, while I was trying to cipher out a likely hiding-place, that little circumstance came back to me, and I made up my mind I'd struck it, sure!"

There was no remark made by either of the lesser rascals, and that fact showed how little faith they placed in the hopes expressed by their present chief. They were perfectly willing to help him search, but they had mighty scant hopes of finding aught worth the time and trouble.

Still, Milo Plunkett was not so foolishly sanguine as they seemed to consider him.

Granting that there was a cavern of some description, fit to be made use of by women as a temporary refuge, he knew that it could lie only in one direction from the Filley Ranch.

Toward the river, the ground rose higher, and became broken and rocky. If cave there was, it must be looked for in that direction.

Having given his sworn allies sufficient insight into his plans for the time being, Milo Plunkett touched up his nag, increasing his pace and maintaining it at that, until drawing near their hunting-ground.

Although nothing had turned up to give them trouble, and they knew of but a single enemy in that section, not one of the trio but gave more or less thought to White-horse Wheeler, now that they knew that personage had actually put in an appearance in their range.

"It's dollars to cents that he's taken the hint and pulled out for safer quarters," declared Plunkett, as he drew rein and gave his followers the signal to follow suit. "Still, we're not running any longer chances than we just have to, so we'll do the rest of our prowling on shanks' mare."

Hitching their animals in a spot where they would be comparatively safe from discovery, Milo Plunkett bade his fellows separate and hunt for some indication of the cave, in the quarter marked out in his mind as being the correct one.

"If you find it, or find anything that looks as though it might pan out rich, don't chip in on your own hook, but come back to the horses and wait for me; if I'm not here ahead of you."

After all now that he was actually on the

spot, Plunkett felt far less sanguine than he had while at a goodly distance. Might he not have misinterpreted the real meaning of those few stray words?

"Never!" he doggedly told himself, in answer to this growing doubt. "There surely is a cave of some sort, and where else could it be? And when that's found, they are found!"

From the words spoken, it can be seen on what slight foundation the smuggler lieutenant was basing his hopes, and how great were the chances against his success, yet fortune seemed to come his way, and before that actual search had lasted half an hour, the problem was almost certainly solved!

This was mainly due to the feverish impatience which had taken possession of Linda Filley after the departure of White-horse Wheeler.

He could not rest, and sleeping was altogether out of the question, so far as the maiden was concerned. Worn out with grief Mrs. Filley had dropped off into a fitful, broken slumber, but nothing of the sort visited the daughter.

Not so strange, bearing in mind all that she had to think over: the dark uncertainty which enveloped the fate of her father, the strange absence of Maurice, the possible proximity of those merciless savages, and, by no means least, even if mentioned last, the man whom she knew as Edgar Winston.

An inward fever seemed consuming the poor girl, and though the words let fall by the man whom she could no longer deny was very dear to her heart of hearts, kept ringing through her excited brain, one portion of them was forgotten, just when such forgetfulness proved the most disastrous.

Forgetting Wheeler's warning to keep closely within the cave, and on no account to venture forth before his return, Linda, fancying she could be running no risk in so acting, crept frequently to the entrance of the cave, listening eagerly for some friendly sound.

She kept well back behind the leafy screen while listening, but at length, fancying she caught the faint voice of her brother calling on her name, Linda pressed through the cover, running a few steps out in the clear moonlight, then pausing to listen anew.

The sound was not repeated, and, as she realized how fully the rays of the moon were outlining her figure, Linda shrunk back with sudden terror, the caution given by Edgar Winston ringing through her ears.

It was remembered too late, however. Brief though that exposure was, it lasted long enough for Milo Plunkett to recognize the being for whom he was searching, and it was only by clapping a hand over his lips that he smothered the cry of fierce triumph which rose in his throat.

"Mine! all mine!" he muttered, to himself, as he carefully took note of the exact spot before stealing away to secure his backing. "I know it takes a mighty good man to buck against you, Colonel Cougar, but I'm doing it, and I'm getting there, too!"

It did not take long for Plunkett to get his men together at the rendezvous.

Feeling precious little faith in a successful hunt, and knowing that it was just possible White-horse Wheeler might still be prowling in that locality, neither Broome nor Morris were overly anxious to wander very far from their horses.

By freely expressing their delight, they contrived to cover their amazement at this discovery, and feeling a much keener interest in the affair, they listened to the words of their leader.

"I only saw the girl, but of course the old lady is with her. I've no particular use for that one, unless I can use her in carrying my main point, but we'll have to count her in, as a matter of course."

"Now, this is the programme, for the present: of course it may have to be changed, to suit circumstances, you understand?"

"I reckon we will, boss, when you've told us more," dryly said Jack.

"All right: you've only to follow after me, and lay low at the mouth of the cave until I call on you for help. If I have to do that, just wade in, as I order, or as you may feel necessary."

Milo Plunkett, now that his triumph seemed so close at hand, lost much of his customary coolness, and when he started forward to visit the cave and its occupants, neither of his mates had a very clear idea as to what they were expected to do or how to do it.

Gaining a position close to the point where he had seen Linda enter the bushes before that rocky front, Plunkett paused to lift his voice in clear yet guarded accents:

"Mrs. Filley!" he cried out. "I'm a friend, bringing important news of your husband!"

An instant's breathless silence, then the quavering cry of a woman came in muffled tones, seemingly from the very rocks before them, and the rascally schemer knew that he had not missed his calculations.

"I'm a friend," he repeated, at the same time advancing to the masked entrance. "I'm coming in, to tell you all how—"

The leafy screen was violently parted before him, and the haggard wife stood revealed, hoarsely gasping:

"Anderson—my husband—where is he?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A COLD-BLOODED PROPOSAL.

THAT same impetuous movement on the part of Mrs. Filley, showed Milo Plunkett a faint ray of light coming from beyond, and catching her trembling form in his arms, he bore her back into the cavern, where he caught sight of Linda, pale and frightened, shrinking away from his coming.

He could see none others, and dim though the candle-light was, if still other persons were in that den, he felt sure he must have detected their presence as he swept a swift glance around.

That fact set his last fear at rest, and by the time Mrs. Filley rallied sufficiently to repeat her question, the outlaw was fully prepared to answer it, after his own fashion.

Permitting the woman to go free, and standing so that he could readily intercept either of them in case an attempt was made to leave the cavern, Plunkett deliberately spoke:

"I hate to tell you, my dear ladies, but—both Anderson Filley and his son Maurice are held captives by one who—"

"Captive? My man? My boy?"

"Oh, mother!"

Mrs. Filley staggered back like one dealt a crushing blow, and Linda caught her falling form in her arms.

Plunkett made no offer to lend his aid. Instead, a cold, hard light gleamed in his black eyes. Let them suffer! 'Twould make his an easier victory in the end.

This was shrewd enough reasoning, or would have been such with ordinary women for subjects, but both mother and daughter swiftly rallied, and facing the outlaw, the wife and mother almost sharply demanded:

"I can guess, but—name the villain, Milo Plunkett! Who dares hold my man captive? By what right?"

"Well, ma'am, I hardly think the question of right occurred to the colonel when he—"

"Colonel Cougar? Do you mean that he has—Speak out, sir! Tell me just what it is we have to fear!"

The poor woman tried bravely to speak with dignity, but her heart was torn, and her brain beginning to whirl anew as she faced that arch-villain.

As for Linda, never liking the man, just now she was regarding him with intense loathing. Instinctively she felt that he was not to be trusted, even if he did come to them with friendly words upon his lips.

"I'd rather bite the tip of my tongue off, dear ma'am," purringly said Plunkett, trying to fill his notes with deepest sympathy, but making poor success of the attempt, thanks to his unholy triumph. "But—since you must learn the ugly truth, perhaps the better way is to tell it at once."

"Go on. I am not so weak—I am strong!"

"Well, Colonel Cougar has captured both your husband and your son. He swears that they have been playing spy on his movements, and were in the very act of denouncing him and his men as smugglers when—"

"You are his right-hand man, Mr. Plunkett!" impetuously cried Linda. "I've heard him say as much, more times than I can remember!"

"I admit it, with shame, ladies," sadly confessed the rascal, his face lengthening to correspond. "I might have remained his right-hand man, only for this last devilry of his. But there is reason in all things, and when it comes to brutal assassination, why—"

"Not my man?" gasped Mrs. Filley, quailing with horror in her face. "He hasn't—not my man, my poor boy?"

"No, he hasn't killed either of them—yet," replied Plunkett, pitilessly playing on their heart-strings. "But he swears they shall both die deaths of such torture as would bring a blush of shame to the painted cheeks of an Indian on the war-path, unless they join his gang of law-breakers, and consent to his marriage with you, Linda Filley."

The maiden shrunk back with a choking cry at those words, but Mrs. Filley, now that danger seemed to menace her other child, rallied bravely, a slight tinge of color leaping into her haggard face as she confronted the villain once more.

"And you—you can bring us such foul tidings, Milo Plunkett?"

"Would you rather I kept you in total ignorance, Mrs. Filley? Am I to blame for what another man does?"

"Yes, if you are a man!" sternly cried the now thoroughly aroused woman. "You are that devil's friend. You are in all of his games, as you admitted but a moment ago. Then—since you did not lift a hand to hinder, you are no better than Colonel Cougar himself!"

"Mother—don't!" Linda said, brokenly, fearing lest such harsh words only serve to make bad matters worse. "Perhaps Mr. Plunkett—Oh, sir!" her clasped hands lifting, her tear-wet eyes fixed imploringly upon that darkly hand-

some face as she continued: "You are a man—you are not *all* evil! Say that you will save my poor father, my dear brother, and I'll—I will pray for you, all the days of my life!"

"Is that all you are willing to promise, Linda?" slowly asked the villain, his hands reaching out toward the maiden, the unholy light growing more intense in his black eyes. "If I risk my life in saving both father and brother for you, what reward will their daughter and sister bestow upon me?"

With a swift movement Mrs. Filley stepped between the two, pushing her frightened daughter back, facing the ruffian boldly as she spoke:

"Are the prayers of a daughter nothing? What more can you ask of the poor girl, of me, when we offer you our undying gratitude?"

"No doubt you think I stand in sore need of prayers, Mrs. Filley?"

"If you can make a mock of our fears, our torture—yes!"

"So you think I'm jesting, Mrs. Filley?" he asked, in mock surprise. "I was never more earnest in my life than I am this minute, and if you will give me a chance, I'll prove it to you."

Mrs. Filley, growing paler, feeling that the real truth must soon come out, fell back a pace or two, her arm stealing around the waist of her daughter as she managed to utter:

"Go on. You have more to say. Tell us the very worst, for—I fear I can't endure much more!"

Only an utter brute could have seen and heard unmoved. It was a brave effort, doubly piteous in a woman whose heart was doubly rent.

But Milo Plunkett hardly knew the meaning of the term mercy. He had set up a certain mark, and until that was won, he would permit nothing to turn aside his aim.

"If you don't know what manner of man Colonel Darke Cruger is, Mrs. Filley, I can quickly enlighten you. He does not know what pity or mercy means. He never gives way, when his mind is once fixed. He would trample his own mother to death in the mire, if she tried to check his progress when once he has fixed his goal!"

"Now, he knows that both your husband and your son have been playing spy upon him and his. He knows that they have tried, even if they have not succeeded, to sell him to the sheriff, for smuggling. He found the plain proof upon your husband this day, when he saved him from being butchered by the redskins!"

"Now, he holds them both prisoners, and swears that they shall only go free after joining his band, taking the most solemn oaths, and forcing Linda, there, to become his unwilling wife."

"This is what he has told your husband and your son, for I heard his very words. But, to me, he spoke still plainer: he said that, Linda once his wife, he meant to kill both his captives, to make sure neither of them could ever betray him to the hounds of the law!"

"The demon! And you—you come to tell us this?"

"I come to tell you all this, and at the same time to offer you the life and liberty of both your son and your husband, Mrs. Filley."

"You will—you can—"

"Mother—his eyes!" gasped Linda, in that awful moment keener-sighted by far than her parent. "Don't trust him! He means evil!"

With difficulty Plunkett choked back his hot rage, to say:

"I mean to offer you their lives and freedom, I repeat. *I can save them both*, but I'm the only man living who can say or do as much. Now, it rests with you whether or no I do rescue your dear ones, ladies."

"You mean—What do you mean, Milo Plunkett?"

"That I have long loved Linda Filley. That if she will swear by the Heaven she believes in, to become my wife on the day I may name, I'll cheat Colonel Cougar, and bring your loved ones back home, safe and sound."

As though paralyzed, the poor women heard him through, but as his measured tones ceased, simultaneous cries of aversion broke from their lips, and Mrs. Filley spoke up, almost harshly:

"You merciless demon! If we were weak enough to yield to your vile proposal, my husband would be the first to curse our folly! If this is your only terms, sir, you can—*go!* leave us, I say, or, woman as I am, I'll drive you forth like the pitiful, cowardly knave you surely are!"

Milo Plunkett uttered a sharp whistle, which quickly brought his worthy allies inside the cave, and to them he spoke:

"You are backing me, boys, I believe? If I give an order, you will carry it out, no matter if it be against these ladies?"

"We'll do just whatever you tell us, boss," replied Jack, for both.

"Good enough! And now, Linda, swear on the Bible to marry me whenever I say the word, and I'll save your dear ones. Refuse, and I leave them to perish, besides turning you over to Colonel Cougar. It's him or me for a husband; now take your choice!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A NIGHT TRAIL.

HAVING fully set his mind on winning, Darke Cruger was not a player who sat down and waited for the right sort of cards to be dealt out to him in the regular course of the game. He preferred to lend chance a helping hand, and rather than idly wait, would almost rather stock the deck against himself.

"Up and be doing" was a favorite motto with him, and this eventful night was not to see him throwing that maxim over his shoulder.

Although Martin Westgate had been far from enthusiastic over the prospect when he came to understand just what the chief expected to gain through the nose of Smuggler Duke, Colonel Cougar seemed to think failure impossible.

As into all other schemes, so he plunged into this new one, hurriedly leading the way from the Lone Ranch, and heading toward that part of the river known to the smugglers as "the crossing."

Smuggler Duke seemed willing enough to play his part, and when, after leaving the Lone Ranch pretty well behind them, Colonel Cougar tested him with a scent at the confiscated footwear, eagerly bidding the dog "hunt 'em up, old boy!" the St. Bernard gave a whining growl as of eager understanding, and tore around, sniffing the leaves and ground as though crazy to take up the trail.

"Look at him, will you?" exclaimed the chief, in high glee, but pressing onward while talking. "A thoroughbred bloodhound couldn't take to it quicker! And you doubted? Why, man, we'll only have to give him the scent at the crossing, take the back trail, then hold our breaths in for yelling whooray!"

"I'm trying to hope it's just that way, sir, but—well, Duke isn't a born trailer, you remember, colonel!"

"But his master is a born croaker!"

Martin Westgate said no more, for that retort had in its tones a touch of anger, and he knew that the colonel was a bad man to thoroughly arouse, even by those who were his truest friends and followers.

There was no difficulty about finding the point where that brief encounter had taken place, thanks to the report made by the signal-man, and not a little to his owner's relief, Duke showed just as much eagerness now as at the start. He sniffed at the boot held by Colonel Cougar, then began quivering the ground like a well-trained setter, sniffing and giving brief whines, as though eager for the unusual duty. And then, with an eager but subdued bark, Duke started away like a bloodhound on a fresh scent.

"Didn't I tell you so?" triumphantly cried the chief, giving the smuggler a sound thump between the shoulders. "He's on it, bigger'n a hungry wolf, while you—out with ye, croaker! You're not fit to own such a treasure wrapped up in hair!"

"A better dog never lived, colonel, in his own way; but when it comes to following a trail, it's pretty much as the notion suits. If he feels that way, he's good as the keenest. If he *don't*—well, I'm only hoping this is one of his feel-good times, boss!"

Colonel Cougar was too busy following the St. Bernard to fully catch or comprehend this answer. As he had declared, he felt that it was all over but shouting, and, truly, there seemed good ground for such a belief.

Smuggler Duke had caught the trail, and was carrying it at a good but not too reckless pace, occasionally giving tongue after his own fashion: a low, eager whine, or a smothered bark which was barely loud enough for the ears of his two followers.

The trail which Duke alone had senses keen enough to discover, much less pick up in that gloom, proved a tolerably crooked one, but that fact did not alarm the colonel, when he remembered that it had been laid by a spy, who would hardly be rash enough to advance in a more direct line upon those he was shadowing.

Martin Westgate was far less at ease in mind, although he held his doubts in check for the time being.

He could not fully appreciate what powerful reasons Colonel Cougar had for wishing to find the Filley women, but he could not help seeing how intensely eager he was in this chase. Then, if Smuggler Duke should fail, as was only to be expected, what turn would his rage take?

Without chick, child or wife, Duke was all in all to the ex-sailor, and while Martin Westgate felt a respect almost amounting to awe for the being whom he frankly admitted as his chief and master, even he must not lift a menacing hand against that life-mate.

There was one fact which Westgate noticed, and which ought to have been remarked by the colonel: instead of growing fainter and less easy to follow, the trail Smuggler Duke was lifting appeared to grow hotter the further he ran it, and as the end came near, he gradually left the two men further behind, despite their efforts to the contrary.

All at once the excited dog burst into rapid barking, and giving a smothered whoop of exultation, Colonel Cougar pressed on, pantingly crying to the dog's owner:

"Worth his weight in jewels, Westgate!"

Treed — trailed home, or I'm a howling fraud from Deceptionville!"

Westgate had heard a like baying before, and tried his level best to pass his chief in that headlong race for the goal, but in vain. The master of the Lone Ranch reached the spot in advance, and when Martin hurried up, the colonel was staring blankly at—a barkless, topless stump of a lightning-blasted tree!

And against that tall stump Smuggler Duke was reared, whining and growling, almost beside himself with doggyish eagerness to claim the prize he had trailed so long and so far.

And that prize?

The moon was shining fairly upon the stump, and there, twenty feet above the level, perched upon that splintered top, was—a huge 'coon!

No sooner did he recognize this fact, than Martin Westgate, with a grip on the neck of his dog, plunged from light into shadow, thinking only of saving that dog from a possible shot.

"Didn't I tell ye he didn't know how to trail a man critter?" the ex-sailor spluttered, excitedly, as he beat that hasty retreat. "Don't shoot—don't blame the dog, boss, but—take it out o' me!"

Even then Colonel Cougar failed to at once realize what a ridiculous mouse his mountain had brought forth. This was but a bit of by-play. The 'coon had been surprised, and had run up that stump, to escape its natural enemy, but—Duke surely had been on the right trail!

But as Westgate called back that hasty plea for his pet, the disgusting truth forced itself upon his mind, and for a few moments Colonel Cougar was fully as dangerous as one of his namesakes.

He cursed and blasphemed, he stamped and kicked, he rushed forward through the darkness, swearing that he would murder the fool dog who couldn't tell the difference between a raccoon and a human being.

Doubtless he would have put this threat into execution, and might have received bullet or steel in return from Duke's owner, only for one fact: Martin Westgate had taken to silent flight, and Smuggler Duke was bearing him company, both heading for healthier quarters.

It was only when he failed to find the fugitives, and when no answer came back to his more placable calls, that Colonel Cougar finally gave over that too brilliant fancy, sullenly admitting himself defeated once more.

Growling, cursing, fuming, the smuggler chief turned his face toward the Lone Ranch, in a far more dangerous mood than he had been at any time since he learned of the peril menacing him and his through the Filley family.

"I've cut too much time to waste already," he growled; viciously. "I'll waste no more. I'll twist the truth out of those devils, or I'll put them to worse torments than ever a crazy buck Injun invented in a nightmare! I'll—I'll—"

He was far too angry to be able to picture details, but the general result was never in doubt; and when he reached the Lone Ranch, it was with the firm determination to extort the truth from the lips of his prisoners, or kill them while trying.

With this savage determination uppermost, Colonel Cougar passed directly to the room containing the trap-door. He jerked this up, without wasting time in taking his customary precautions, and harshly calling out to the damned ones:

"Wake up, you devils! I'm tired of fooling, and now I'll—I say, Anderson Filley!"

There was no answer, and flinging the trap-door clear back, Colonel Cougar leaned over the opening, to see—*nothing save the bare cell!*

For an instant it gave him a stunning shock, but from that he quickly rallied. His prisoners had simply passed into the adjoining cell, and were too stubborn to answer his harsh summons.

"Will you talk, or must I come down there to do a bit of coaxing?" he called out, threateningly; but, as before, without an answer.

Waiting a few moments, then making sure his weapons were securely in place, Colonel Cougar dropped down the rope ladder, descending it in anything but an angelic humor.

"I'll make you pay for the trouble, gentlemen!" he declared, striding across to the open door in the partition wall, peering through: to see only an empty cell!

His captives were surely gone, but how? He sprang through, rushed to the narrow door, but it held firm. Then—*where were his captives?*

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER'S LUCK.

ALL was darkness about him, as White-horse Wheeler felt his feet touch the floor of the smugglers' store-house, and he held fast to the rope ladder with one hand, while listening intently.

Since he had witnessed the cautious exit and retreat of Colonel Cougar, the revenue scout had no fears of finding any others of the evil

gang in that place, and that pause was but mechanical on his part.

The strange story told by Peleg Ounce was flashing across his brain, and now he could rightly understand that peculiar odor of wild beasts which mingled with the musty, earthy scent natural to an underground receptacle like this.

"Smells as though the other dens had been opened, lately," he reflected, as he released the rope ladder, to find and ignite a match. "Was he here, feeding his pets, I wonder?"

That question received no answer, just then. By the flickering light of his match, the detective glanced swiftly over sundry packages which instinct told him must contain smuggled goods, and for the time being he was all detective, with room for professional thoughts alone.

Calling an aniline pencil into play, White-horse Wheeler made his private mark on a number of the packages, in parts where the characters would be least conspicuous, but to which he could swear when the right time came around.

This done, he gave a little more scope to his curiosity, and heedless of the fact that Peleg Ounce would be suffering torments at his delayed return, White-horse Wheeler burnt enough matches to give him a tolerably accurate idea of the place in which he now found himself.

He took note of the two doors which led into the wild-beast dens, one on each of opposite sides. It was a grim scheme, and not without its advantages, although both troublesome to make and to maintain.

He was passing to the door on his right hand as he had entered, but his match burnt out and the end fell to the floor before he could catch it. Thus far he had carefully pocketed each bit, to guard against suspicion being awakened too early, and he stooped over for this end, groping for it in the dark.

His fingers, while brushing the stone floor, came in contact with a piece of cold iron, which he instantly recognized as a key!

Catching up this find, White-horse Wheeler struck another match, and curiously examined his prize: for prize it surely was, if his sudden suspicion should prove true.

"If it's a key to either of these doors, what's to hinder my fixing up a nice little surprise-party for the colonel?" was the thought that flashed through his mind.

That would be a fitting reward for the smuggler's carelessness, and then what better safeguard could he invent to prevent those smuggled goods from being removed before he, the detective, could strike his blow at the law-breaking gang?

As yet this was but a whimsical fancy in his brain, but as he took time to recall the exact location of the Lone Ranch, White-horse Wheeler turned toward the door which opened in that direction, striking a fresh match, by the gleam of which he examined the two strong locks with which that door was supplied.

He cautiously inserted the key, and, to his grim pleasure, found that it turned freely in the wards. Beyond a doubt it belonged to this very door, and certainly had been lost by Colonel Cougar during his recent visit to the store-house.

As his match burnt out, White-horse Wheeler bent an ear close to the door, listening for some sound from Grim Death, the cougar which, according to the story told by Peleg Ounce, had his quarters in the adjoining cell.

He could hear neither growl nor stir, but just as he was about to give over his listening the faint, indistinct sound of a human voice grew audible. Some person was talking, and that from no very great distance!

Acting on impulse, White-horse Wheeler turned the key in one of the locks, then withdrew it, to slip a little bar of brass into the other, or lower, keyhole. He turned this also, but held the key with a firm grip as he slightly pushed the door ajar.

If the cougar should hear him, and try to force a way in, he could easily jerk the door to and lock it in time. All the more readily from the fact that it swung into the cougar's den.

Slight though that crevice was, it admitted a faint streak of light from the other side, and the revenue scout could more clearly catch the words which Colonel Cougar was just then uttering.

A strange thrill swept over his frame as he distinctly heard the voice of Maurice Filley crying out sharply:

"Not a word, father!"

Closely following that brief sentence came the hollow echo as of a closing door, then all was silence.

For a few moments White-horse Wheeler stood like one petrified, hardly able to trust the evidence of his own senses, yet fully aware that he had made no mistake: that was Maurice Filley speaking, and his sharp, almost fierce words had been directed toward his father!

"That devil! He's caught 'em both!"

Before he thought of what he was doing, White-horse Wheeler pushed the iron-studded door wide open and stepped across the threshold.

He remembered, the next instant, for the smell was very rank, and could be mistaken for nothing else.

He swiftly drew his knife, but, even as the weapon came forth, he noted the opening into the further cell, and by the light which came through from the oil lamp he saw that the den was vacant save for himself.

The terrible thought that Colonel Cougar had turned his pet lion loose to dispose of his prisoners struck the detective, and he sprang across the den, to stop short in mute amazement at what met his eyes.

The carcass of Grim Death lay in a pool of its own blood plainly dead. And there, sitting close together, were Anderson Filley and Maurice, his son!

Instantly all his coolness came back to the revenue scout, and crouching down where he could not be seen by the captives, who might easily ruin all by giving vent to their glad surprise in recognizing a friend, Wheeler made sure that none of the enemy were visible.

His fears set at rest on this point, the rest was not very difficult; the main point being to make his presence known without exciting the prisoners into uttering a cry loud enough for watchful ears to catch.

Crouching close by the opening, White-horse Wheeler whispered:

"Be wary, friends! Lock your lips tightly, for your loved ones' sake!"

The captives gave a bewildered start, but made no sound, and the detective quickly added, in low but clear tones:

"I've come to set you free. I'll show my face at this opening, but for your lives don't make a sound those devils can catch!"

White-horse Wheeler rose up, revealing his face by the lamp-light. He saw that he was recognized as a friend, and springing into the cell, he used his knife to cut their bonds and set them at liberty, at the same time hastily muttering:

"No questions! Mrs. Filley and Linda are safe. I'll take you to them, if you'll only act sensible. Now—come on!"

Knowing as he did how full of questions they surely must be, White-horse Wheeler hurried both father and son into the cougar's den, without giving them a chance to rally from their amazement sufficiently to put their thoughts into words. And not until they all stood inside the store-house, with the iron-studded door doubly locked behind them, would he permit them to utter a syllable.

"I'll explain, if you insist upon it, dear friends," he then said, but quickly adding: "Only, 'twould be a heap sight safer for all hands if you could bottle it up a few minutes longer."

"One word: *they are safe?*" tremulously asked Anderson Filley.

"Safe and sound, when I left them, only a couple of hours ago," was the prompt response. "Now, let me go up first, to give you a little more light. Follow after me, when you can see the rope."

Time was too precious to be wasted in idle chatter, and White-horse Wheeler rapidly ascended the rope ladder, pushing back the trap-door, emerging, to be greeted with a groan of intense relief by Peleg Ounce.

"Good Lawd! I done reckoned you was—"

"Button up!" muttered Wheeler, sternly. "I've found my friends, and they're coming up after me. Don't make a sound, or I'll smother you!"

Father and son quickly ascended, and then, as essential prudence, White-horse Wheeler had Peleg Ounce assist him in removing all sign from above and around the secret entrance, before going further.

Not until this was done to his satisfaction, would the detective consent to moving away from that spot. He wished to keep the secret of that escape shrouded in mystery as long as possible, lest the enemy take alarm and to flight at one and the same time.

Hastening to where the two horses had been left, White-horse Wheeler insisted on father and son mounting, while he and Peleg trotted alongside. And as that retreat was fairly begun, explanations were made on both sides, sufficiently clear to serve for the time being, although much of interest was necessarily omitted by all of them.

Nothing occurred worthy of note, until they had almost reached the cavern: then, a woman's shriek rung forth with terrifying intensity!

CHAPTER XXXV.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER'S REWARD.

"MY girl—it's Linda!"

In hoarse, almost choking accents came that cry from the lips of Anderson Filley, as he recognized that voice, but never a sound uttered White-horse Wheeler, though he was the very first to take action.

Without giving a thought to the peril which that wild scream almost surely indicated, the revenue scout dashed straight ahead, making for the masked entrance to the cavern. He only knew that the woman he so dearly loved was in extremity and that he must save her, or share the same fate.

He dashed through that leafy screen, throwing all caution to the winds. He caught sight of Linda struggling to break away from the arms of Milo Plunkett; he took note of nothing else, just then.

His rush was fierce as that of an infuriated wild beast, and as the smuggler lieutenant, warned by the shouts of his mates, partly turned in that direction, it was to meet a crushing blow full in his face.

With a gasping sound, Plunkett reeled back, to fall like a lump of wet clay, relinquishing the prize he had so surely deemed his own.

White-horse Wheeler caught Linda with his other arm, but the maiden gave a cry of terror, pushing him violently back; not through hatred, but to save his dear life!

"White-hoss—the devil!"

"Shoot—kill him, or we're—"

With startled but vicious cries, Peter Morris and Jack Broome did all that lay in their power to save themselves and avenge their chief by downing the revenue scout for good and all. Each one fired a shot, but both bullets missed their mark, thanks to Linda's swift action.

Then, almost destroying the mask of vines and bushes in their frantic haste, Anderson Filley and Maurice came rushing into the cavern, and closed with the smugglers.

It was a brief but desperate struggle. More than one more shot was fired, but by good fortune no life was taken, thanks to the rush made by the detective. Down went the two ruffians, and before another minute had passed over their heads, they were deprived of their weapons and in a fair way of being bound.

Peleg Ounce had not taken an active part in that spirited skirmish, partly because he had been distanced in that fierce rush by those who had far dearer interests at stake, but mainly from a constitutional dislike to hard knocks.

Still, he came to the cavern-entrance, pistol in hand, and doubtless would have put in a shot or two where it would count to the best advantage only for the impossibility of distinguishing friend from foe by that dim light.

But presently he caught sight of Milo Plunkett, lying on the ground, with his bruised face turned toward the light, and recognizing the man who had doomed him to death by the rope, Peleg lost his fears, and leaped forward to take possession of that prize.

"I've done ketch'd him, boss!" he spluttered, in wild excitement, as White-horse Wheeler rose to his feet, his hands full of the weapons taken from the overthrown smugglers. "I'll hold him fast, or I'll blow him clean to thunder ef he tries fer to skoot!"

"Hold him fast, but don't harm him, Peleg!" hastily exclaimed the revenue scout. "Shoot him, and I'll skin you alive!"

"Good Lawd!"

Half in amaze, half in disgust came that exclamation, but Peleg was wholly under the influence of his new "boss" by this time, and contented his heart as best he could by squatting on Milo Plunkett's stomach, rubbing his nose with the cold muzzle of a revolver as the smuggler lieutenant showed signs of rallying from that knockdown blow.

"Stiddy, ye pizen impl! Try fer to kick or to squirm, an' off comes the hull dog-gun roof o' yer shanty!"

With the exception of that drawn by the detective's hard knuckles, it proved to be a bloodless victory.

Terrribly agitated though they were, neither Mrs. Filley nor Linda permitted themselves to utter word or sound that could distract their loved ones' attention from their stern duty, and the elder woman, with a forethought such as few could have exhibited under like circumstances, hastily tore strips from a blanket to bind the smugglers with.

Then—that meeting and that greeting: words alone are powerless to do it anything like justice, so why make the attempt?

White-horse Wheeler's face was hardly broad enough to contain his smiles of joyous satisfaction as he saw that glad reunion, and, leaving the four together, he crossed over to make sure of Milo Plunkett, who was held in hated subjection by Peleg Ounce.

"Don't give him any show, boss!" excitedly spluttered Peleg, as the detective came to his side, bonds in hand, ready to fasten the limbs of the smuggler. "Just look at him! Pizener'n ary copperhead in sheddin' time! Pizener'n ary—Lay still, dog-gun ye, houn' dog!"

It was about the sorest temptation Peleg Ounce ever battled against, and fearing lest he yield to it, scattering the outlaw's brains with a shot, White-horse Wheeler hastened to apply bonds strong enough to answer his present purpose.

"You know him, I should judge, Peleg?" he half-asked, half-asserted, as he removed the guard almost by force. "You cling to him like a twin brother!"

"Know him? Mebbe I don't! Mebbe 'tain't the dirty devil as sent me up a tree, fer somethin' I never didn't even think o' doin'!"

"You dirty traitor!" viciously snarled the captive. "Only for you, nothing of all this would have happened! Only for you—"

"Who is he, Peleg?"

"Plunkett—Milo Plunkett! An' he's the next big toad in the puddle a'ter the kunnel, boss! An' ef I hed my way, I'd jest—"

"Guard him, then, Peleg, but do him no hurt," hurriedly interrupted the scout, who had kept one eye on the reunited family, members of which were beginning to look around for the man to whom they owed their present joys.

Mrs. Filley was the first to claim his hand in gratitude. Her eyes were dimmed by tears of joy, and she could not control her voice, but her tremulous lips were pressed almost reverently to his bent forehead.

"That's one for gratitude, now give him a fair one for love!" said Anderson Filley, a hand on each. "Only for him—"

"God's choicest blessings be yours, my son!" murmured the grateful wife and mother, her lips touching those of the abashed detective.

Weak and trembling with pure joy, Mrs. Filley was caught in the arms of her husband, who was in hardly better case, just then. And with a touch of boyish malice, Maurice pushed Linda forward, whispering in tones loud enough for the detective to catch:

"Give him another sweet buss—for love, sissy!"

Not a little to his amazement, Maurice was obeyed. With a bravery which proved how truly she loved this man, Linda gave her hands into his warm grasp, then lifted her face, to yield her lips as well!

"Good Lawd!" ejaculated the deeply interested Peleg, unconsciously smacking his own lips, with a report so distinct that Maurice burst into a fit of hearty laughter, and the lovers drew apart, blushing, yet supremely happy, even if a bit confused by that unlucky echo.

For a time all was happy confusion, so far as those at liberty were concerned. Explanations were in order, and while it would have been impossible for them to have cleared up all misty points under several hours of steady talking, the Filley family were not long in arriving at the same conclusion: only for Edgar Winston, they might never have seen each other again, in this world at least.

"And yet," said Anderson Filley, with a humorous twinkle in his gray-blue eyes as they passed from Wheeler to Linda, then back again, "I'm not so sure that it's worth while adding my thanks to our friend!"

The detective quickly caught his meaning, and it hardly required Maurice's low chuckle to add more color to the cheeks of poor Linda. And then the revenue scout proved his true metal, by taking one of those little hands, and facing the parents with:

"I ask more than your thanks, dear friends; give us your blessing!"

Linda, confused, but happy beyond description, broke away, and would not be reclaimed just then, even by White-horse Wheeler himself.

Peleg Ounce produced a timely diversion, by making known the desire of Milo Plunkett for a word with the detective. This was granted, and without beating around the bush, the smuggler begged for his life and liberty, declaring that, to earn them both, he would expose all the secrets of the Lone Ranch, and give the entire gang of smugglers up to justice.

"Your offer comes entirely too late," coldly responded White-horse Wheeler. "I already know enough to run in the whole gang, but even if I didn't, I'd rather lose every other member than give you even the ghost of a chance to cheat the gallowes!"

Peleg Ounce was assigned to outside guard duty for the present, while Maurice and Wheeler fell to work getting up a much-needed breakfast. After that had been discussed, all agreed there would be time enough to discuss their next movement.

In this, however, they were fated to be disappointed. Thanks to circumstances which no foresight could have guarded against, trouble was coming upon them, and Peleg gave the first warning by a scared rush.

"They're comin', boss!" he spluttered, in alarm. "Kunnel an' all!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER'S WARNING.

COLONEL COUGAR was fairly stunned for a time by the mysterious vanishment of his important captives. He could scarcely credit his own senses, and moved dazedly about those two cells, empty save for himself and the carcass of Grim Death.

The door leading into the store-house was locked, and thanks to the manner in which its locks were attached, it would be impossible for any person or persons on that side, to have opened a passage without actually destroying that door.

Hard as it was to credit such a thing, he concluded that the Filleys, father and son, must have escaped through the trap in the flooring above their cell, passing from thence through the house, to freedom beyond.

"Who helped them? I'll have blood for

this! Blood—I'll kill every cursed traitor who—"

His voice choked, and he almost suffocated with his furious rage before he could rally sufficiently to make his way up that rope-ladder once more.

He tried to learn the truth, but was unable to do so, unless he could credit the solemn oaths of all the men within the ranch: they had neither seen nor heard aught of the prisoners, since his departure.

Not knowing on whose head to wreak his vengeance, Colonel Cougar managed to choke it down for the present. If delayed, his blows would not fall any the less heavily in the end, and while he was wasting time in blind raging, his enemies were making their escape good.

That reflection enabled the smuggler chieftain to rally, and bidding his men prepare for the road, he rushed to saddle his own horse.

"They'll make for home, of course," his thoughts ran, in part. "If the women hadn't hidden near that, why was the boy prowling around so soon after dark? They're there, and if we find one, we'll surely find them all!"

He knew that the fugitives could not have gained a very great start. They must have escaped during his absence from the Lone Ranch on his wild-goose chase with that infernal dog!

"I'll kill him! I'll roast the mongrel whelp by inches!"

Only for his mad trust in Smuggler Duke, this escape—this cursed treachery could never have taken place. For, even yet Colonel Cougar did not suspect the real facts. How could he, knowing how guarded he had been in his visit to the store-house, and ignorant as he was of having lost the key by means of which that door could be opened?

Still, the colonel was not a man to neglect any possible chance, and as so doing would consume but a few seconds, he passed around by the way of the secret entrance to the receptacle for smuggled goods, and by the gray dawn of a new day, he quickly detected signs which the darkness had hindered White-horse Wheeler and Peleg Ounce from entirely obliterating.

He stared aghast at those marks, as the terribly significant truth dawned upon his whirling brain. The store-house had surely been visited since his departure, and his prisoners had made their escape through this hidden way!

The blow was a crushing one to Colonel Cougar, yet he almost instantly rallied. His face was ghastly in its lack of color, but his tones were cold and even as he spoke:

"They've found us out, men! Now we've got to catch them; just got to catch them! That or—were broken all up!"

Without pausing to explain his meaning more clearly, Colonel Cougar led the way at a hard gallop, heading directly as possible for the Filley Ranch, where he hoped to either find his prey, or to be in time to intercept their flight as they came up.

The cool, fresh morning air served to clear his muddled brain, and after riding for several miles in breakneck fashion, the chief slackened speed, both to permit their mounts to catch their second wind, and to more fully warn his followers of their actual peril.

"You all know that there's the very devil to pay," was his beginning, as a signal called his men close enough to catch all his words. "You know that we caught the two whelps who have been trying to sell us out to the law. You know what pains I took to keep them fast, until I could force them to admit just how far their treachery had been carried. But now—they've broken away, and taken with them the secret of where we hide our contraband goods!"

A united growl of fierce rage came from the smugglers, bringing a grim smile to the face of their leader.

Little need of wasting time in working up a revengeful feeling there! Unless his strong hand should hold them back, finding the game would be fully equivalent to slaying it!

"I hate to even think that any one of our family would deliberately betray our secrets after this fashion. I own up frankly that I did suspect some among you of playing me false, and setting free my prisoners, but that was while my head was hot, and I couldn't reason it out.

"Now, I believe I've hit on the truth! I firmly believe that White-horse Wheeler, the most dangerous detective in the entire North or Northwest, has dealt this heavy blow at our security!"

Again that venomous growl.

"I know that he has been reported as being right in this neighborhood. Milo Plunkett brought the news. Some of you were with him, so you can give a guess as to his judgment."

"I reckon 'twas White-horse, colonel," said one of his men.

"If I held any doubts then, they've gone glimmering by now," was Cruger's quick addition. "I know some of you fellows are a bit inclined to be afraid of the hound; to think he's a devil on ten wheels! But, when all's told, he's

only a man, and a bit of lead, or a few inches of cold steel can lay him out as stiff a corpse as any other man!"

"If we can only catch him, boss!"

"We've got to catch him, or we'll catch worse! He's up here for the express purpose of breaking up our honest work, and unless we down him, he'll surely down us."

"If we find him 'twill be in company with the Filley outfit. Kill him, without giving him a chance to hit back, but—don't harm the women! Kill each and every man you see in the gang, but spare the petticoats!"

By this time, though the party had kept moving onward all the time, their horses had gained breath, and were ready for a longer, harder dash than had been their first spurt.

Eagerly enough Colonel Cougar pressed forward, though ugly doubts would haunt his too busy brain. He knew that it was only one chance out of a score that he would find his prey at the Filley Ranch. Knowing as they must, that discovery could not be long delayed, and that they would naturally be expected to take that direction, would they be rash enough to take it?

"Unless the women are actually hidden in that neighborhood!"

That was his main hope, now, and even that gave him but scanty satisfaction when he came to count up his many disappointments of the past dozen hours.

"Will this infernal streak of bad luck never come to an end? Am I fated to make a botch of everything I turn my hands to?"

Over and over Colonel Cougar kept asking himself those questions, not because they afforded pleasant food for thought, but simply because he could not drive them out of his mind.

But, ere long, it seemed as though fortune was turning his way once more, for the party was met by Martin Westgate, with his dog, and pantingly the ex-sailor made a bid for restoration in the good-will of his leader, by crying aloud:

"I've found 'em, boss! We've found 'em—Duke and me!"

"You've found—Out with it, curse ye!" snarled the smuggler.

Westgate made a very brief story of it. He saw that Colonel Cougar was in one of his most dangerous moods, and at once plunged into his report, which may be briefly summed up.

Hoping to make a strike which would make full amends for Duke's folly, Westgate had continued the hunt, long after his chief had abandoned it in hot disgust.

For hours he had failed; then, guided in part by a trail which seemed perfectly fresh, he drew near the broken ground in which the cavern actually existed, and was just in time to catch a glimpse of the Filleys, father and son, rush forward and plunge into the very hill, as it seemed to him.

"There was some shooting, but I knew I couldn't tackle the gang by my lonesome self, so I set out for you, colonel!" was his conclusion.

"And you can show us where that place is?"

"I'll risk my neck on that much, boss!"

"Good enough! Jump up behind Watkins, there, and lead the way. If we catch our game—On, boys!"

Too thoroughly excited by this bit of unexpected good fortune, Colonel Cougar led the way at a swift gallop, only slackening his pace when warned by Westgate that they were drawing perilously nigh the spot where their game had taken refuge.

Alighting, fastening their animals, then leading the way with Westgate at his side, Colonel Cougar only paused when a clear, stern voice called forth the warning:

"Halt, you imps! It's White-horse Wheeler who's warning you!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER'S DEFIANCE.

INVOLUNTARILY Colonel Cougar and his guide recoiled, even as they came to a halt catching the significant sound of a Winchester being full-cocked.

The human voice might possibly be mistaken, but not so the meaning of that clear, sharp click-click!

The smuggler chief cast a quick glance over a shoulder, but it was not born of fear, though more than one of his men gave it that very interpretation, and so felt in a measure justified in their actions.

Like chickens when they hear the warning croak of chanticler that hungry hawk is hovering above, the rascals made a wild dart for whatever cover lay nearest them at that precise moment. Of them all, only Martin Westgate and Smuggler Duke stood by their chief-tain.

"Stand up to it, ye devils!" hoarsely cried Colonel Cougar, but the harm was already done, and it takes more than empty words to bring order out of a panic.

"You'd better show the same good sense, Darke Cruger," called out the same stern voice which had sent forth that grim warning. "I've got you lined, and I'm studying whether or no

your life is worth wasting a good cartridge over!"

"Who the dogs are you, that crows so mighty loud?"

"Do you ask who I am?" another voice broke in, stern yet tremulous with an honest indignation. "Come one inch further, you black-hearted whelp, and I'll write my name all over you!"

Colonel Cougar was in an ugly predicament. He could hear, but he could not see. He knew right where his coveted prey was stationed, but just how, and with what manner of backing, he could only surmise.

He knew that at least one gun was covering him, hardly forty yards away, and if its holder was anything of a marksman, he could surely lay him out, cold as a wedge, before he could reach cover on either hand.

If his men were prepared to back him up in a charge, that risk he would have counted as nothing; he would have rushed straight on, without pausing to hear or to heed. But, instead of backing him up as they were in duty sworn, the cowards had scattered to cover, like a bevy of frightened quails!

In such a dilemma, one must reason swiftly, and Colonel Cougar called forth in answer:

"You can shoot me, if you like, but 'twill be all the worse for the weaker members of your party. I'm the only one who can save them from perishing, if so much as a single shot is fired!"

"Listen to the cur whining!" cried the mocking voice of Maurice Filley. "Get out o' that, you wolf's whelp! I'll waste—"

The impetuous lad was taken at his word, and having selected his most promising line of retreat, Colonel Cougar took it, plunging headlong into the nearest cover.

Maurice certainly did not intend this should be the case, and his pistol—one of those confiscated from their captives—tried to catch a bead on the smuggler chief, but only to be foiled by the strong and ready hand of White-horse Wheeler.

"Don't! You're letting him off!" protested the boy.

"That's just what I meant to do," retorted the revenue scout, his grip relaxing as he saw Cruger plunge into concealment.

"But if you only knew what that devil has said and done! If you only—"

"I knew this much, Maurice," earnestly spoke up the detective, one hand resting lightly upon the youngster's shoulder, while his keen eyes kept watch without the entrance. "The first shot fired from this side, even if it killed the chief, would surely fetch the whole outfit down on us, in a bunch."

"Well, will it make it any easier to leave them their chief?"

"You heard what he said; you know what he hoped to win?"

"You can ask that! You can even hint at such a thing?"

Before White-horse Wheeler could reply to that indignant suspicion, Colonel Cougar challenged from his covert:

"I say, you fellows in the cave! One word with your head-talker, or we'll rush you, then ask questions—provided any are alive to answer them, then!"

"You surely will not be on the living list, Darke Cruger."

"And pray who may you be, loud-blower?"

"You can call me White-horse Wheeler, for lack of a better title. But names or titles cut little figure, just now. What is it you want?"

"First to make you and the fools who appear to be trusting you, understand one ugly fact. That is this: not one of you can leave that den alive, without my full and free permission!"

"Did you ever try your luck at enumerating young fowl, colonel, basing your calculations on the number of egg-fruit deposited in the various incubators?"

"Chickens or no chickens, your goose is cooked!"

"Good luck to your teeth when they come to dinner, colonel!"

"Curse such chaff! I mean sober business. And when it's all simmered down, here's the sum total: I'll kill every last one of you, unless my terms are accepted, without delay or debate!"

"And those terms are what?"

"The sacred oath of each man among ye to join my company. The word of honor given by Anderson Filley, his wife and his son, that they will induce Linda Filley to become my legal wife!"

"The answer is soon given, Darke Cruger," cried White-horse Wheeler, losing all trace of mockery or of carelessness from that moment. "I can shoot by sound, just as surely as I can by sight. I have had you lined through all this idle chatter, and I would have killed you for the cur you surely are, if I hadn't known the galls is awaiting you, Percival Tudor!"

For a single breath there was silence, then a hoarse, hateful voice cried out:

"You, is it, cursed bloodhound! Down him, lads! A cool thousand for his head, living or dead!"

"Steady, men, out yonder!" called out

Wheeler, in clear tones. "We've got three of your mates in here, and I'm blocking the passage with their living bodies!"

If Colonel Cougar had really meant his fierce words as signal for a charge, they failed of the desired effect. There was a rustle among the bushes in front of and to each side of the cave, but nothing more serious took place. And, possibly to cover that irresolution, the smuggler chief called out, sharply:

"Steady, lads! Wait a bit until—What lies are you pitching this way, White-horse?"

"The plain truth, Darke Cruger, so I'm not greatly surprised at your failure to recognize it, off-hand. But, maybe you'll believe the testimony of your own pals, you cut-throat!"

"It's truth, colonel!" cried Milo Plunkett, in tones through which almost abject terror was echoing. "They've got me, and Peter Morris, and Jack Broome, all trussed up, and used to stop the mouth of—"

"All a lie, men!" raged the colonel, from his covert, and suiting action to words as he added: "To prove it, here's my shot!"

He fired his rifle, and, through a strange mortality, the leaden missile struck Milo Plunkett squarely between the lips, passing through, to sever the spinal column, and so producing instant death!

There came a fierce charge on the part of the smugglers, led by their chief; but it was bravely met.

"Block 'em, mates!" sternly cried Wheeler, his pistols beginning to talk sharply. "It's death to all if they get in; so, keep 'em out!"

Shoulder to shoulder the three men stood: for Maurice was a man, now that the tug-of-war was coming! Shoulder to shoulder, each man fully armed, thanks to the weapons taken from their prisoners.

That mask of bushes and vines seemed spouting fire and smoke, so rapidly did the defenders work their revolvers, and that charge, desperately though it had begun, came to an abrupt ending.

Not a dozen yards were gained, before the smugglers began to falter, then to recoil, finally to dart aside for the nearest cover.

Even Colonel Cougar seemed cowed, for he was not to be seen by the defenders when the blue smoke lifted sufficiently for them to view the battle-field with some distinctness.

As for themselves, White-horse Wheeler alone had been touched by a bullet, and that was but a skin-deep wound on one shoulder.

Neither Broome nor Morris had been injured, and all this seemed incredible until White-horse Wheeler explained its meaning in a whisper to the Filleys, father and son.

"By his orders, they fired wild. He wants Linda—living! Swear that you'll never let her fall into his clutches, if I'm killed!"

The stern pledge was given, and then matters settled down for a few minutes; no longer than that, however.

Brush, and dry limbs, and even trunks of dead trees began to rain down in front of the cave entrance, and shortly after this diabolical trick could not be mistaken by the besieged, Colonel Cougar called out in his most malignant tones:

"Rain the fire down, lads! Smoke 'em out of that hole!"

Blazing brands came sailing through the air, to fall upon that combustible pile, and with fierce yells the smugglers began to triumph.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

WHITE-HORSE WHEELER'S VICTORY.

COLONEL COUGAR laughed harshly as the dry pile began to ignite, and once more he hailed the apparently doomed inmates of that den.

"Last call, you fools! Come out, empty-handed, begging for mercy, or slowly roast in your living grave!"

No answer was made to this fierce speech, but the menaced party were grave enough as they summed up the situation.

"We can't hinder them from keeping the fire burning," said White-horse Wheeler, nothing save his frequent glances toward Linda betraying how sorely his heart was being racked; on her account, not on his own.

"You heard what he said," grimly muttered Anderson Filley, pistols in hand. "When we can't stick it out longer, we can leave this."

"Never to surrender to him, father!" flashed Maurice, hotly.

"Of course not, my boy," with a fleeting smile as a hand touched those light locks. "But, we'll die fighting the demons!"

"Not until the last hope is gone, though," hastily interposed the revenue scout. "Remember the ladies; they must never fall into his clutches!"

As though fearing to trust himself to say more, White-horse Wheeler turned away and passed back to where Whirlygust and the Indian horse were standing. They had been brought inside the cave, at Peleg's warning, and now the rough-rider was meditating a bold stroke.

It might fail to produce the desired effect, but matters were already so bad that they could not well be made worse!

"What are you going to do, Winston?" asked Filley, as the revenue scout came forward, in

company with Whirlygust. "Surely you can't intend trying—"

"I can't stand idle and see her—see you all perish like rats in a hole!" almost fiercely replied the detective.

He gave Linda a quick kiss, then sprung into the saddle, and sent the noble white stallion plunging straight through that mass of fire!

In each hand he gripped a cocked revolver, and from each muzzle spouted a puff of flame-tinged smoke, one to the right, one to the left, as the astonished smugglers burst into wild cries at that wholly unexpected apparition.

And then, clear and thrilling, came the call of a bugle!

"The soldiers! Look out, everybody!"

"Halt!" rung forth a stern voice, and with waving saber, a captain of cavalry gave the command which deployed his men, swiftly cutting off all retreat on the part of the law-breakers. "If one of you fires another shot, I'll string him higher than Haman!"

White-horse Wheeler, partly blinded by the fire through which he had so recklessly dashed, came to an abrupt halt, Whirlygust stopping in his tracks with a suddenness which would have unseated almost any other rider.

"Hold 'em level, captain!" the detective shouted, in wild glee at this unlooked-for succor. "They're smugglers, and I'm a detective, here to— Would ye, you devil?"

Seeing his prey surely wrested from his grip, and feeling that he could expect no mercy on either hand, Colonel Cougar made a desperate stroke for life and liberty.

He crept swiftly along toward one end of that deployed line, meaning to shoot down a soldier, trusting to catch his horse, and thus break away; but it was not to be.

White-horse Wheeler caught sight of him, and sent Whirlygust forward in a tremendous bound. He left the saddle at the second leap, coming down within grasp of the desperate criminal.

Cruger fired one shot, but his lead went wild, for the detective had him fast. They fell heavily to the ground together, but Wheeler was uppermost, and by the time help could reach the spot, his muscular fingers had choked Colonel Cougar into insensibility.

Terrified, demoralized, seeing how surely their time had come, each and all of the smugglers dropped their weapons and threw up their empty hands, begging for quarter.

The captain held them level long enough to gather at least a hint of the truth from White-horse Wheeler and the Filleys, then gave orders for their binding.

Long before this task was completed, willingly as the soldiers fell to their work, White-horse Wheeler had disarmed and bound Percival Tudor, alias Darke Cruger, alias Colonel Cougar, who had at last been run to earth.

When the entire band of law-breakers were safely put in bonds, explanations were in order, and a few words explained the timely arrival of the soldiers.

They belonged to the —th Cavalry, and were a portion of the force in pursuit of Sitting Bull and his Sioux braves, who were making for Canada, across which boundary line they alone might find a refuge from Custer's avengers.

A marauding squad of the red-skins had been trailed to that neighborhood, and when firing was heard, the soldiers at once took saddle. They were guided more directly by the rising column of smoke, and thinking to take the red demons wholly by surprise at their fiendish work of destruction, the boys in blue had approached with all possible caution.

After this explanation was given, White-horse Wheeler, on his side, showed his credentials, and briefly but clearly detailed the evil deeds of this lawless gang.

He asked the captain to help him convey his prisoners to the Lone Ranch, where he could surely guard them all, until he could get word to the county sheriff, who would hasten to his aid with his posse.

Although this sort of guard duty was out of his regular line of business, the gallant captain consented. Possibly the sight of fair Linda Filley helped him reach this conclusion, but, even so, that fact did not lessen his merit in the eyes of our friends.

The prisoners were taken to the Lone Ranch, and with them went the entire Filley family. As White-horse Wheeler said, that building could be defended against a possible attack by the red-skins, far more surely than could the Filley Ranch.

Their fears on this point, however, failed to materialize. Doubtless the Sioux braves learned how closely they were being pressed by the soldiers, and, abandoning their marauding, they rushed off for the boundary line.

Their later history need not be alluded to in this connection. It is known to all men, together with the fall of their wily leader, Sitting Bull.

Peleg, of course formed one of the rejoicing party when the Lone Ranch was taken full possession of, and from that day to the present, Peleg has lived an honest life, liked if neither honored nor highly respected. Peleg was

hardly a character to inspire either emotion. And yet, all things taken into consideration, many a worse man than Peleg has lived and flourished in these, our days!

Colonel Cougar was brought to justice, and after a fair trial, was found guilty of murder, and duly hanged.

His followers were convicted of smuggling and passing counterfeit money, being shortly thereafter placed where their labors, while less highly remunerated than they had been as law-breakers, certainly did their country more good.

Milo Plunkett, slain by the chieftain whom he had tried to cheat and supplant, was buried near where he had fallen. No stone marks his grave, and if his memory is ever recalled, it is as quickly banished.

He had been without merit while he lived, and he was without respect or regret now that he was dead.

White-horse Wheeler reaped due credit for breaking up the most dangerous of all the bands which have flourished near the boundary line, and, possibly deeming it just as well to "quit while his credit was good," he resigned his appointment, buying in the Lone Ranch, where he settled down as a fine-stock grower, shortly after his marriage to Linda Filley.

It is hardly necessary to add that neither of the parties most concerned have ever regretted that alliance. Their children are growing up around them, a credit to their parents, and a future blessing to their country.

Anderson Filley and his true wife are yet living. Maurice, with a fair young wife and a couple of fine children, live with the "old folks," and Filley Ranch is as well-paying as its owners are popular in the land.

Whirlygust is still alive, but old age is wearing him out, and ere long the noble stallion must lie down, his life's journey over. But, so long as tender and loving care can keep him with them, he will be sure of tender treatment, and when he dies, many sincere tears will dampen his grave.

Until a few years since, another loved animal was growing old gracefully. When Martin Westgate went to prison, he bequeathed Smuggler Duke to the lad whose life the St. Bernard had saved, on that eventful night, and right well was that trust fulfilled. A neat stone marks the grave of Duke, and Maurice often regrets the loss of the noble brute.

THE END.

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